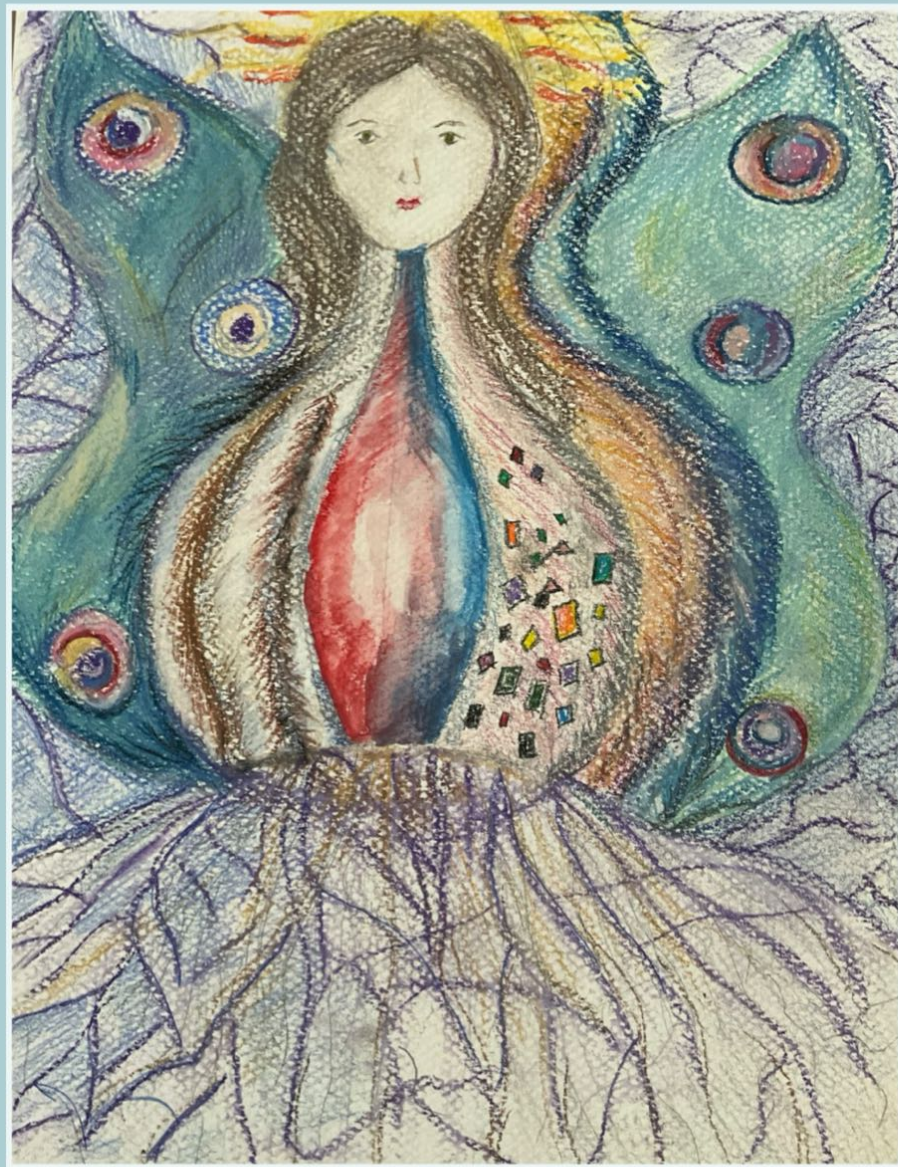


Healing Soul-Tracks



Vessela Balinska-Ourdeva

HEALING SOUL-TRACKS

By

Vessela Balinska-Ourdeva

The Journey's Onset

Indigenous Australian peoples' songlines (Fuller & Bursill, 2021), known also as dreaming tracks, inspire the memoir's chapter organization by land|marking important intersections on my life-journey, but more significantly, indicating points on the SELF-PLACE matrix (Dowd, 2011, p. 141), which inform my relationship with the Turtle Island-Canadian terrain, the place I currently call home and has been my home for almost thirty years. My attempt to 'map' the healing soul-tracks, taking me across the subterranean psychic fields and tracing my somatic cosmology, respects the Indigenous ways of knowing—storytelling, shamanic journeying, visions, dream images, Nature connectedness, mythopoetic imagining, symbolic thinking, and arting, which I am re\learning with the guidance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous wisdom keepers, who are showing me the way to the heart of the North American land but also to the heart of my native land, Bulgaria, and to the heart of Mother Earth, the Universe, and Life. The concept of pla{y}cefulness (Balinska-Ourdeva, 2023) in dialogue with Donald's "placelessness" (2020, p. 158) is the primary "creative tension" (Greenwood, 2016), starting me on the voyage: meandering, spiralling, recursive routes, oscillating between places, in|placing and dis|placing me simultaneously.

By way of opening the memoir, I express a profound gratitude for the journey and the inspirations bestowed on me as I walked the many expressive arting paths, being able to share the gifts and offerings along the way with my son Dimitar Ourdev, my husband Ivan Ourdev, my son's fiancé Lilly McEwan, and other members of my family—my mom and dad, my brother, my sister-in-law, and my nephews, as well as with my closest friends, especially Christine Nescoly (my soul-sister), Marie Pawluk, Anna Kabat, Jane Crowell-Bour, Rosi Bossio, Miriam Tuazon, Andrea Hamilton, Joanne Ellison, and Jill Horwood. I will mention also Alexandra Fidyk, Sandra Maiorana, Denise Requier-Monfett, Michelle Finley, Cinnamon Cranston, Chelsea Rae, Karen Williams, and all the medical doctors, nurses, and therapists (too many names to include here), who attended to my health needs. Lisa Sorensen; Gwen Becker and Anne Linville; Rhonda Reed, Katherine Schock, Jane Diner, Kelly Undershultz, Debby Sumantry, Tanya Wolfe, Ben Luchkow, and Wayne Lavold; Linda Mcfalls and Regan Holt - each one of these cherished persons has been an invaluable

support throughout the travel. They have graciously accepted my art pieces and thought-seeds as “[acts] of gratitude” (Atkins & Eberhart, 2014, p. 56), and this is what I would like the memoir in its entirety to be: an act of gratitude for the bountiful life I have lived, for the loving relationships I have formed, for the fullness of being I have experienced. Hopefully, the narrative marks the starting point of another healing wayfinding that will allow me to continue to share my capacity to love and my reverence for beauty and let these unfurl through mythopoetic and symbolic connections transcending time-space even when I am no longer physically here but still a part of the cosmic web-of-Creation.

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1 | PLA{Y}CEFULNESS

Expressive Landmark 1: January 11-17, 2023

To my son who is first generation immigrant to Turtle Island-Canada, arriving on this territory when he was six years old. He has spent most of his life here. The opening meditation on playfulness speaks to the purpose of my journey—to explore and re-stor(e)y my relationship to place and to Self. It answers Resmaa Menakem’s invitation to “move through clean pain” (2017, p. 19; p. 262). The journey is unfinished, for it will take my entire life to reconcile “the creative tensions” (Greenwood, 2016) my somatic topographies en flesh. By way of Land Acknowledgment, this piece is also a recognition that trauma recovery is never complete, yet traumatic experiences are callings for spiritual transformation. They could be a fertilizer for the expansion of consciousness and conscience as compassion, empathy, and connection to self and others grow into an ethical orientating to being and becoming.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2014, September 14). *Opening Up*.

A Placeness Meditation: By Way of Land Acknowledgement

A place is energy that touches and opens up a tender spot in me. It is a resonance. It is vibrations pulsing together within and through my body in __THUMP__THUMP__THUMP__ Rhythmic__, which holds me in space-time, an electromagnetic field))))))))))((((((((((((across continents and boundaries, felt as the unity of Life in a web of attracting, repelling, intersecting, converging, diverging, oscillating, trembling, harmonizing, dancing, singing wave-particles.

The way I form a connection to the land I walk on is through a coherent heartbeat. In tune. Supported. Grounded. Centered. Whole.

A felt sense of place is a sacred experience, a form of attunement to Life's incessant throb.

I write from Turtle Island-Canada, within Treaty 6 Territory, Métis homelands and Métis Nation of Alberta Region 4. These are the traditional territories of many Indigenous people, among them the First Nations of Nehiyaw (Cree), Densuliné (Dene), Nakota Sioux (Stoney), Anishinaabe (Saulteaux), and Niitsitapi (Blackfoot). Their footsteps have marked the land, which I currently call and have called 'home' since July 4, 1995.

In the present expressive landmark, I am also back home in my native country, Bulgaria, visiting my parents in 2009. The memory is much more than just a trip to a tourist destination. It is a re-lived experience of being with my parents, enclosed in the intimacy of filial bonds but also descending into the subterranean psychic structures of the Bulgarian collective unconscious. Through reminiscence, another feeling transpires, which this essay attempts to track and map, paying both homage to, and inspired by, the way Australian indigenous peoples mark their land through songlines, also known as dreaming tracks (Fuller & Bursill, 2021).

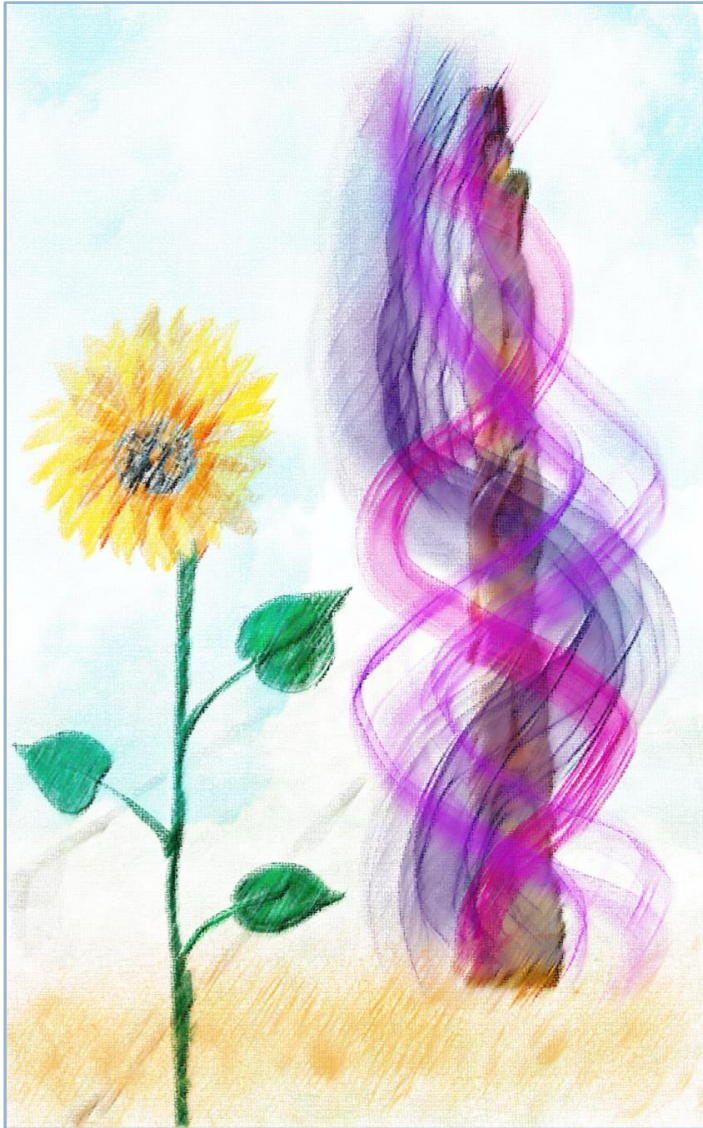
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The snake-like precision of the road travels to the end of infinity. My parents and I follow it, unaware of its smoothness. The racket of my father's car fills the early morning with a noise too intense for the soothing freshness of the wind and the summer sun's burning ascent. The day will be hot: at odds with the weather, I feel alive in the blinding, dazzling heat.

The road is the most important part of this trip. It leads to the tip of a razor-sharp cliff, which falls into the Black Sea at an almost 90° angle. I am content looking at the vast fields surrounding us, painted deep green by the corn stalks and cheerfully splashed with the intense yellow of sunflowers.

We are going to Kaliakra.

The legend of Kaliakra cloaks the place in mystery, making it a suitable location for reuniting with my Bulgarian-ness, a part of me I have not felt since my arrival at the beginning of July, except, perhaps, during a brief solitary hike up *Пирин планина*. The memory of the legend shimmers in the summer heat: a child-like fascination with the fate of the forty maidens who plunged into the



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, March 15). *What is a Historical Fact? 1.0* [Digital art].

tempestuous sea to escape the clutches of Ottoman invaders. I settle into a story I most likely misremember. My high school history teacher: short, stocky, with heavy-rimmed round glasses and a pendant dangling from her neck, shaped as ornamental Thracian earrings, steps forward and begins the lesson. The simplicity of her plain brown skirt and earthy brown turtleneck contrasts with her flamboyant and confident gestures. I see her clearly etched in my mind's eye. A maiden herself, she pauses before the story of the beautiful virgin Kaliakra starts to spill, with gusto, out of her being's depth. I sense her hope that we will absorb the plot's soap-opera-esque sensationalism and learn the patriotic lesson about the suffering of 'my people,' suffused with emotions of fear

and rage. I don't think she meant for us to be compassionate, though I remember feeling Kaliakra's determination—tight back muscles, the whole body tense, spine stiff like a pointed arrow; somehow, however, my teacher's and the heroine's despair fail to surface.

Cape Kaliakra is a narrow land stretch, overlooking the Black Sea from some seventy metres high cliffs. It seems abandoned despite the tourists walking around. The feel of ruin shrouds the

actual remnants of the second Bulgarian kingdom. A Google search satisfies the curiosity of foreign visitors by stating that Thracians, Romans, Byzantines liked the place for its inaccessibility. Old names abound—*Tirizis* and *Acra*, and *Acra Castellum* I did not know the capital city of Dobrotitsa's territory was located on what I see as a relentlessly bleak protrusion. The name of the cape, though, holds untamed mystical power, a witch's spell; it is an untold story wanting release from the darkness of collective memory.

It was in the days of the siege—now citing from memory without consulting the sources—of the last Bulgarian fortress standing proud and tall to face the wave of Turkish colonizers. Kaliakra was the capital city, built on a rock that cut into the salty waters and made it unapproachable except from the inland. The citizens, desperate to save their lives, ran terrified, when forty virgins made the decision to die. They braided their hair, interlaced their hands, and jumped together into the abyss below, to evade religious conversion or a death by slaughter. They escaped spiritual death by way of physical death and remained in the collective memory as heroines. I think of suicide bombers—the closest analogy I can conjure up to capture the devotion and religious fervency of these forty Bulgarian girls, their resolve to remain free in death, together. Liberation from oppression is a mass feeling. Relief from pain and suffering is solitary.

I am unable to wrestle the truth from the legend. The fabula is frivolous and enthralling. Repetitive. Mystifying. At the tip of the cliff from which Kaliakra and the rest of the virgins plummeted into the sea, an edifice is built. Words turned into stone: an obelisk depicts forty maidens braiding their hair, entwining their hands so that not a single one can deter from the sacrifice. I stand before it and wonder: why did my teacher tell us about the one girl called Kaliakra? Why is her name remembered while the rest are forgotten? Feelings of betrayal seep in, a dark knot forms in my mid-ribcage, and I turn to the other notable landmarks to indulge my tourist thirst for sights: a digital camera eye draws the thin line of my patriotic affection. No tears well up. And in the distance—modernity: rows upon rows of wind-power generators.

I sift carefully through the words of the legend, seeking validation for my inadvertent disgust with Violence and Aggression. How ill-timed is it, on a day full of sunshine and bright blue skies touching the azure water deep below, to fly from a precipice seventy metres high, to lodge myself on the edge of history and imagine the line of forty maidens falling to their death? How can I fathom their fortitude and dread? Maybe this is why the story seems less pertinent now than forty years ago. I have the experience of history that comes with distance, both physical and emotional. It is the theatre of emotions, my body—a sole witness. The facts don't matter, but the legend lives

inside the words I carefully rescind as the car rushes back to the other end of forgetting. The snake-like precision of the road cuts through the bone of nostalgia, infinitely.

What wisdom and hope does the story of Kaliakra hold? The very place where I stand at this moment allows me to see the sacrificial act for what it is: a story, void of élan.

On three sides, the Black Sea cradles the peninsula, which now hosts the ancient ruins. I look for the right spot where the virgins stood. I scrutinize the cliffs one by one to see where I would be standing in preparation for the fatal dive. But my imagination fails to stir.

The narrative I remember is an all too elusive and one-dimensional “containing skin” (Dowd, 2011, p. 139) to support any identification. My body remembers differently: the syrupy air, the pervasive tangy-honey scent and textured

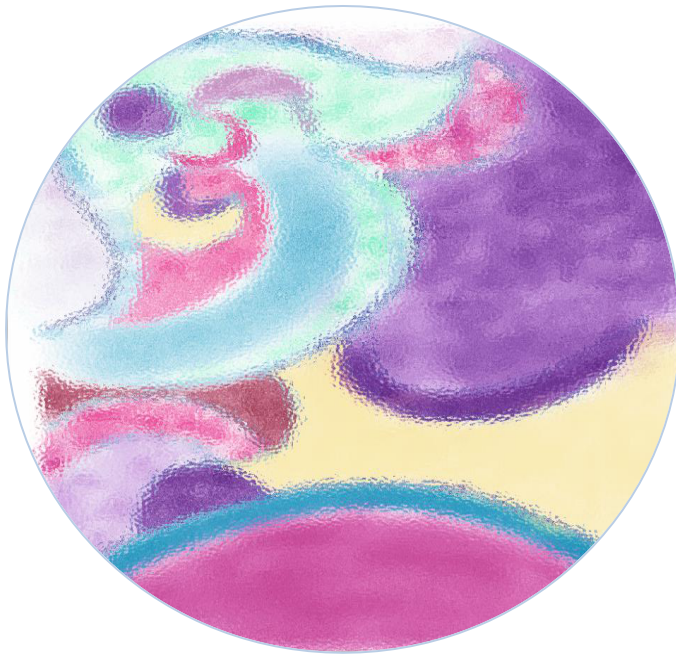
solidity of the muskmelon my parents and I bought from a roadside stall and ate in the car with our hands on the way back from Cape Kaliakra. The sweetness of its taste and the sticky juice running through my fingers as I reach out to grab hungrily yet another piece my mother has cut from its flesh. The shared food and the satisfaction of being together, on the road to our next stop, my uncle’s house some eighty kilometers ahead—this is what I want to invoke. The moments of intimacy in the rattling car, the aroma of the fields and orchards, ripe with grains and fruits, the stories my parents told me as we drove downhill, absorbing the tangible whirr of a sun-filled afternoon; these are the images my memory desires to store. The body recognizes the



Balinska-Ourdeva. V. (2003, March 11). *What is a Historical Fact? 2.0* [Digital art].

transformation of “I” into “we” through the closeness with my parents, through “the inner kinships with the world [as] an ancient and natural extension of the human psyche” (Cajete as cited in Lacourt, 2012, p. 65). In my re-memory, it is precisely the power of this desire, a desire to re-live the experience of this day, a desire to go back to my homeland, to re-visit the places of my high-school history memories that bring the past to life.

Fast forward. It is late July 2016, my most recent visit to the country of my origin. I recall a moment during my hike up the Pirin Mountain when my entire being is cradled and my feet turn into roots so deep, I feel connected to the Earth’s axis, an imaginary line intersecting with galaxies, stars, and planets. I have not had a similar experience on Turtle Island-Canadian territory yet, but my body imprints the impression of my wholeness and oneness.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, March 17). *Contemplative Reverie* [Digital art].

Words fail to convey the whisper and caresses of the ancient presence that stills me and wraps me in a blanket of reverence so powerful, I lose track of how I got to that spot—a small clearing to the right of the trail. Wild blackberry and raspberry bushes, blackthorn, white fir, spruce, and beech trees, where shrubs and grasses whose names I don’t know in English, surround me and hum in the late afternoon sun. I lose a sense of what time means, or why I am here. I cannot put into words the melting, supple porousness my body experiences, merging with trees, grasses, soil, sky, and the silence around me. The honeyed scents of summer

blooms nestle in me. A quiet content courses through me.

Recapturing and translating the sensory and emotional richness of the experience in a foreign language (English still trips me and feels unnatural!) is impossible, for the connection between language and land is profound. But when I recently shared my story with a dear Canadian friend, born and raised on the Saskatchewan prairie (she lives in Edmonton now), as we discussed language learning, roots, and indigeneity while having lunch at Kingsway Moxies, she immediately recognized the state and shared her own story about the place that evoked such reverie for her. It

was the year her father took her to the village of Borodianka in Ukraine, where her ancestors have lived for generations.

A felt sense of place is both profoundly personal and archetypal.

The Whorf-Sapir's hypothesis postulates that every human language slices the world into a unique and inimitable reality the speakers of that language share. The songlines of Australian Aboriginal people, the dreaming tracks, are an excellent example. The Bulgarian language and the habitat its verbs-adjectives-nouns-pronouns, and other parts of speech *land-mark*, run in my blood; they *are* my ancestral, cultural, familial, communal DNA, inscribed on skin, muscles, sinews, bones, and nerves through the Bulgarian words I learned as a child. *Планина* (mountain), *хълм* (hill), *долина* (valley), *река* (river), *езеро* (lake), *море* (sea), *небе* (sky), *пръст* (soil), and so on. Thus, I reflect on the meaning of "place" not as a space, although my upbringing and acculturation is, according to Papaschase Cree scholar-educator Dwayne Donald (2020), strongly influenced by a perception that has inculcated a "placement" in "space" over an intimate experience of lived, animated togetherness in a particular location ("morphing of place into space," he calls it, p. 158).

But a place is precisely this kind of intimacy I and others feel, akin to a merging of humans and surroundings, known in Western anthropological literature as "participation mystique" or "animism," dissolving the boundary between subject and object, environment and indwellers, inanimate and animate, local and archetypal.

*A felt sense of place is a mythopoetic, kaleidoscopic, polyphonic,
synchronous and diachronous, depth perspective.*

Presently, having lived on Turtle Island-Canadian soil for the past 28 years, I learn how to be in-placed by looking at our cat, petting his silky-soft furriness, relaxing in his cuddly, comforting, reverberating purrri-ness. I learn how to be in-placed by observing the pear tree in the front yard, witnessing her stillness in motion as the wind sweeps her in a fierce but graceful dance.

I learn how to be in-placed by listening to the house plants that grow in pots in my home, attentive to the gentle slow swinging of a solitary tomato, ripening amidst the weathered-withered branches of the mother-plant, gnarled, dry-leaved, grey-brown, her brittle flesh peppering my fingertips when touched.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, January 12). *Life Cycle*.

I learn how to be in-placed by writing a poem in English about an ant, then painting a river of ants on a white canvas, surrounded by blooming peonies and swaying grasses that my imagination conjured up during an otherwise unremarkable car ride on Whitemud Drive in Edmonton, Alberta. Mary Oliver's poem (1992, p. 21) about the interdependence of ants and peonies, too, is a way into Nature and into the sacred connection with land. The land of the North American continent. The land I landed on when I arrived in Toronto, Ontario on July 4, 1995.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (n.d.). *Internal Landscape* [Acrylic paint on paper].

But in order to be able to summon the ants, the peonies, the swaying grasses, I first had to have a felt sense of kinship with them and their Otherness. Such intimate encounters originally happened in my native country, in the yard of my great-grandmother's home, and the feelings that enliven my intimacy with a Turtle Island-Canadian landscape stem from the somatic imprints these childhood experiences enflesh. Such indelible, incarnate markings from my native land will always mediate my lived experience of the indigenous territory that hosts my current placefulness. The archetype of the earth Mother, the planet and the Universe, reconciles multiple realities and ensouls my links to the land I walk on here and now, the island created with the help of "geese, loons, otters, swans, beavers, fish of all kinds" when Skywoman fell from the sky (Horn-Miller, 2016; Kimmerer, 2013, p. 3).

My displacement is intimately correlated to the placefulness (as opposed to Donald's concept of "placelessness," 2020, p. 158) of sensual occurrences and newly reflected, re-fleshed, re-flexed, re-lived, re-played, re-formed, and re-rendered encounters that crack me open to accept and say 'yes' to the surrounding aliveness in whatever form it touches me in whatever location or terrain I land. The Japanese have a term for it, which I find peculiarly resounding: *kokoro* ("mindful heart," Kasulis, 2008).

The wisdom of place is the interpsychic interaction of one sensing body ↔ with other sensing bodies.

Coming full circle in a spiral fashion: it is a resonance, vibrations pulsing together within, across, and through "creaturely [natures]" (Quibell, Selig, & Slattery, 2019, p. 93) in interlaced rhythms. Movement. Attunement. Coherence. Co-habitation. Harmony. Balance. Interrelatedness. Unity. Oneness. Before, below, beneath, behind, betwixt and between, beheld within-and-beyond human languages—the ineffable mystery, multiplicity, and abundance of Creation.

At this landmark, let me braid another voice that Wabaseemoong storyteller Richard Wagamese replays in his autobiographical novel *Keeper'N Me* (1994/2006). It adds one more trail to the complex topographies my body incarnates:

... I told the boy that we're all tourists. Everyone. Same thing. Indyun or not, we're lookin' for a guide to help us find our way through. It's tough. Takes a long time sometimes and not lots of people find one either. Them that do, well, they really got something to say then. (p. 3; author's italics)

I have not walked on Turtle Island-Canadian territory for a long time, but I am willing to seek guides to the land's heart. The teachings of Richard Wagamese, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Joy Harjo, and many other wisdom keepers, stir my soul and stretch it to the archetypal depths of "all relations," for they invite me to learn, and to grow, and to "[find my] way through." They counsel

me in “soul talk, song language” (Harjo, 2011), how to listen deeply and attune to the rhythms of the cosmos and the Earth, to feel the pulse of all creation and celebrate its gifts and wonders, giving back my *внимание, възхищение, благодарност, любов, грижа* and *уважение*, in words that gratefully and playfully plant seeds, and pass what I have been given to Others—minerals, rocks, plants, animals, humans—who have crossed, are crossing, and will cross paths with me.

The snake-like precision of a road that travels to the end of infinity.

ᑭᑎᑎᑎᑎᑎᑎ *kinanâskomitin* (Nehiyaw masinakihan)

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2 | THE CAVE

Expressive Landmark 2: A place of metaphorical death and rebirth—The cave

“Even though this holy night darkens the spirit, it
does so only to light up everything.”

St. John of the Cross, *Luminous Darkness*

Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip. . . . The IV-line measures time in a room full of people who face a difficult journey to a place where time slows down. Stops. Waits. Plumps up with patience and the promise of mortality. The bustle around belongs to another space, not the one I inhabit. My soul returns to knowing I do not possess but intuit: the dark feminine powers of healing and regeneration through death stare at me openly.

This is the land of Ereshkigal, the ancient Sumerian goddess of the underworld (Brinton Perera, 1981). The descent to this land is usually not of one’s own accord. A sun-oriented, logos-driven culture extolls the active ego and fears stillness, cessation, silence, and surrender to the Life force begetting itself in darkness. Yang energies are threatened. Alarmed, unbalanced, and injured, they suppress, exorcize, and dominate.

The traditional hero story cannot help me to understand the subtle and gradual changes taking place in my ailing body, getting ready for the ultimate descent, becoming one with the “continuum in which different states are simply experienced as transformations of one energy” (Brinton Perera, 1981, p. 21). To cope is to release, to reawaken, to restore, and to revive a woman, no longer ignorant of the hurt blood my familial love oozes, as bonds with mother and grandmother create the fibers to weave a new story from the cave of my memory, from the archetypal womb of the dark moon goddess who enters the cavern so to regenerate, to renew herself, to become fertile and give birth to her own being and everything else, in a constant cycle of destruction, creation, growth, decline, death, and rebirth (George, 1992).

Restorying my personal mythology starts with a journey to two actual caves that connect me directly to the ancient feminine wisdom of unity between above and below, conscious and unconscious, of processes over which I have little control “but in which I may find a grounding if [I] can reverence change itself and find [my] own way to move with it” (Brinton Perera, 1981, p. 34).

In caves, stalactites and stalagmites join to form stalagmites. From ceiling and from floor, the gradual erosion and disintegration of rocks produces new connected formations as water dissolves limestone, air releases carbon dioxide gas, redepositing calcium carbonate on the walls and

insides of the cavern (National Park Service). The beginning of my latest descent dates back ten years. At that time, I was oblivious to the reality of facing a terminal illness at the age of fifty-seven. But my body knew. Dreams, spontaneous images, and poetry revealed the path to regain an “adequate sense of [my] own ground.” Urgent calls to connect to my “own embodied strength and needs adequate to provide [me] with a resilient feminine, balanced yin-yang, processual ego” (Brinton Perera, 1981, p. 56). I revisit here the first stripping of false beliefs about my woman-being. My compliance with distorted understanding of mother-love and mother-blood. Disowned values: softness, reciprocity, warmth, gentleness, and attunement unconsciously held seek illumination. A conscious retreat to my personal trauma’s netherworld to air wounds. The conscious rejection of my mother and grandmother—their suffering, which became my suffering—laid bare. And so voicing a new awareness of the necessity to reconnect with the archetypal feminine energies of the Great Goddess “as Self.” “Full-bodied coherence” (p. 12) of yin-yang qualities: patient yet risk-taking; inactive yet acting; gentle yet bold; timid yet assertive; humble yet confident. An endless list, for the “many-sided feminine” (p. 19) is inexhaustible.

An excerpt from my journal: July 16, 2009

The Magura (Rabisha) cave quietly but attentively listens to the sounds of our steps. Silent, observant, resonant with our movements. The mountain-belly’s welcoming embrace guides us to its inner depth. Our timing is perfect, for we arrive at 11:30 am – 12:00 pm and spend some of the hottest hours of the day in the cave. The air is heavy, damp, earthy, saturated with stillness and otherworld-ness. Once in the cave, ordinary time dissolves. The mystery of creation fascinates me. I offer my attention to the way water patiently carves the stalactites and stalagmites. Teary rocks, weeping slowly and persistently for thousands of years.

Through numerous halls and galleries, the two and a half km long tunnel takes us deeper into the ancient mountain’s belly. Moist stony floor. The smell of limestone mixed with water. A labyrinthine, meandering path, narrow, slippery, and dimly lit. Human-hung lights are an alien presence. But they help us to see the treasures the cave’s dark depths contain. Rocks the colour of desert sand, off-white, or grey, strangely-shaped: some rounded, some sharp, like stony spears

piercing the still air. Rising up. Or river-like down-surgings. Rippling or smooth, hollowed out or protruding, lining the rocky womb's walls. Awe-inspiring.

The experience of being inside is beyond words. Spectacular forms emerge where the water slowly chips away at their surface. My writing fails to capture Nature's artistry, the powerful chthonic, fecund energy emanating from the Earth's depths, taking the shapes of stones frozen in time, yet suffused with the desire for movement—constant and changeable, permanent in their metamorphosis.

One particular formation leaves an irresistible impression on me, mostly because of its twisted shape—a round, textured obelisk the underground water has sculpted into a mushroom, with hair cascading silently into the darkness. Glimpses of rocks, the walls of hollow galleries barely visible, separated wombs plummeting to unknown depths. Meandering amidst them is both a frightening and an elating experience, especially when we reach the half blocked tunnel where an avalanche of rocks has piled stone upon stone as if a mass grave. After two hours inside, I am relieved to be out of the mountain's belly, the wonder of it hard to bear. Leaving the rocky womb, the bright sunlight strikes. Literally and metaphorically, the change from darkness to light, but also the breathtaking sight beyond the mountain, blinds me.

This memory documents an experience I had with my parents while visiting Bulgaria in 2009, intent on reawakening suppressed feelings of attachment to the land of my birth. It was a trip that also rekindled a deep connection with my parents, which over the several years between my previous and this visit seemed to have thinned. Particularly, the walk through the underground revived a physical bond with my mom I have not felt since childhood. I sensed her fragility and aging, but also the stamina that made her the stubborn, driven, independent woman I knew while growing up. The moments when I offered her help by gently taking her arm in mine, letting her lean



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, December 2). *Magura Cave Butterfly*
[Deconstructed photograph, digital art].

on me during the slippery and tricky descent into the cave's depths, provide palpable recollections that today make me wonder about the mystery of family ties. The closeness I felt because of the physical touch was subtle yet powerful enough to recover a sense of intimacy and belonging. I knew my mom by the feel of her skin, the movement of her body, the warmth of her loving energy. It felt right; it was a place where I was supposed to be.

gingerly steps
like babies just starting to walk
uncertain
my mom and I descend
into darkness more primal
than we both can understand
my body anticipating her movements
from before
the moment of birth
invisible umbilical cord—
a sacred reunion
inside an earthy underworld
mother and daughter
mother to mother
we communicate

A childhood memory: St. Ivan Rilski's Cave

The cave in this rumination is a sacred place. The dwelling of the first Bulgarian hermit, a saint who was famed for his purity and holy acts, his kindness and humility. A steep climb up the mountain's back. Tall pine, fir, and spruce trees, a narrow path, ancient gray stones, a carpet of dry needles on top. The wind's eolian tones mix with my grandfather's voice. On a family trip to the mountain Rila, Ivan Rilski's story I learn.

I do not remember how old I was but should not have been more than eight or nine. As we approach the cavern's entrance, behind me my grandfather's eerie voice story tells. Sinners are unable to crawl out of the narrow tunnel and exit the cave, he intones. Wrongdoers get stuck and remain in the cave for eternity, tormented by fierce devils who burn their feet and pierce their flesh

with hot iron rods. Fear clutches my throat and squeezes hard as my heart beats faster. I worry about myself, as I conjure up an image of the tight passage my grandfather describes; I think about my grandmother. She is a tall, heavy-set woman, with the kindest smile on earth. I worry whether she can get through. I know she is not a sinner. At that age, I do not even know what a sinner is, but in my heart of hearts I know my grandma is not one. Yet, I am nervous as we continue to climb higher and higher into the mountain, following the well-worn path before us.

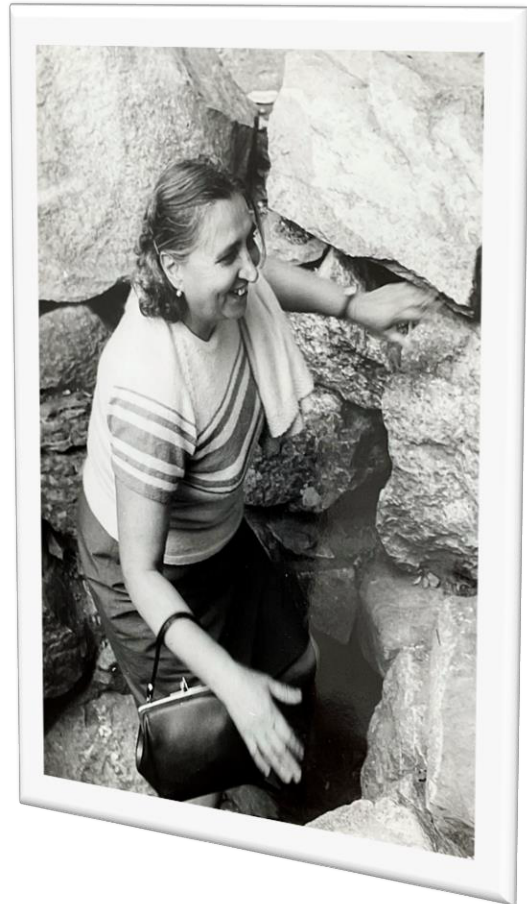
I do not remember going into the cave and actually passing through the tunnel. I remember my grandmother coming out of it, smiling. I remember being happy to see her stepping into the light, gentle and comforting.

I want to rush and meet her, hold her hand and walk toward the stone where we can leave our wishes for the saint to fulfill. We are not wrongdoers. Recalling it now, my grandma's quiet energy resonates in my bones. I am a child again, her warmth—a silken cocoon. A woman of immeasurable softness, she generously shared her wisdom and love with me. But I did not pay attention. Her voice silent now, residing deep in my memory's recesses. Still, yielding support in times of grief, torment, and profound despair.

The cave, a sacred place, bridges two worlds—the world of humans and the world of shamans who enter the underworld to communicate with the Great Mystery and ancestors.

In my memory, the cave is a *temenos* invoking my grandmother's presence. It is a mystical gateway where passing reunites me with her spiritual energy. The cave, a metaphorical space filled with words and imaginings, bonds me to the woman who practically raised me.

In both these memories, the cave is a container holding precious but unmetabolized experiences I have stored over the years. A sacrosanct intersection of feminine energies: mother, grandmother, and Earth Mother. For Jung, the cave secures and impregnates the unconscious (as



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. My Grandma [Photograph]. St. Ivan Rilski's Cave, Bulgaria.

cited in Fraim, 2001, p. 7). A journey through the cave relocates “the ego in a larger context” (Hollis, 2003, p. 14). It is a form of initiation through revival of the spirit, I hope, stitching the link to my native home. I find a new appreciation for the skeins of loop yarn my female ancestors have cast on.

A woman’s sense of self circles back to her “inner psychology and her relation to divergent currents and conflicts of her own feminine self” (Briner, 2002, p. 113). I seek to restore a paradoxical relationship with my mother and grandmother, awakened yet secretly living within me (Briner, 2000, p. 113). To recognize the *yin* energies coursing through my blood means I have to regress to the child I once was and resurrect her from the depth of my unconscious. The cave this way summons me.

The heart is a cave. It stirs a “desire to go beneath the surface to the heart of things to discern the movement of the invisible” (Hollis, 2003, p. 18). I pause and witness the “Self ... selving” (Hollis, 2003, p. 21), perpetual serpentine submerging into the underworld. The symbol of the cave beckons me to reclaim forgotten aspects of my being, suppressed creative energies. Today, they command a changed attitude, a fresh imagining how I am to be and become in the crone years of my womanhood. Calling, demanding attention.

I have to muster the courage to live the questions the blood asks of me, so I can live my way into the answers (Hollis, 2003, p. 22).

the heart’s chamber
is a treasure cave
guarded by a fierce dragon
one enters it
alone
knowing the magic word
that tames the beast

the chamber is alive
with air, water, stone
pulsating
reverberating,
echoing the rhythm
of the Earth

caught in a drum

heavy light *boom*-boom *boom*-boom *boom*-boom

it stores the primordial beat

of awareness—

the dark all consuming

wet, slippery, thick

blood stream

passing through it

In my experience, the cave image brings memories from the past. Entering the cave, I venture into a mysterious territory, of which my unconscious contains “the prospects of a psychological future” (Stein, 2005, p. 10). I hope when upon exiting the cave, conscious and unconscious parts assimilated, I emerge a more complete and whole person (Stein, 2005, p. 11).

The journey is not easy, and many dangers lurk in the dark. But the promise of wholeness achieved through the inner work of “[untangling] the paradoxes of psyche, with making motives and part-selves distinct and holding them in the mirror of consciousness” (Stein, 2005, p. 2) is too tempting to forsake. Heeding “the spirit of the Self” (Stein, 2005, p. 2) immerses me in the language of *mythos*, “through incarnation, by connecting bodily, erotically, relationally through story to a myth that is one of infinite in-corporations of the other through desire” (Fidyk, 2010, p. 4). My mother and grandmother beckon me to travel the pathway downwards to the awaiting depths of my womanhood. Scary and necessary undertaking to see my true face, with “the shadows and the flaws, as well as the lovely parts” (Stein, 2005, p. 9). I am curious about this new woman, empowered by in-sight and freed from the clutches of my cerebral, disembodied Athena and my power-loving, tyrannical King. The call of the cave I answer, initiating a process of wilful descent and whole-ing.

i return to the cave

in search of my full image

brokenness now

marring the body

taunting the spirit

my mother
my grandmother
calling from the depths

tell me their stories
in hushed voices

i am curious:
how did the blood run
in their bodies?
dripping
 like stalactites
 like stalagmites
 forming stalagmites
 growing
from the floor of the Earth
to the ceiling of love

mushrooming the heart-butterfly
ready to return home
to die so the woman in me
can be reborn

Bruised Healing

cessation of desire
brings me face to face
with my bodyful desires;
my sick vessel

pleading love,
i marvel at its capacity to want
 to yearn
 to crave
despite its brokenness

has my diminished ego
taken refuge in abandoning
what makes me human?

sticking to immunotherapy
treatment regimens
is it not a sign my body
is loved?
is cared for?

is able to experience itself
in longing
apart from faith,
risking its impermanence
and change?

sediments of
wishes, impulses, aspirations
limited to day-by-day,
sometimes even hourly
protraction

bite-size joys
in imitation of a healthy body:
i am careful
not to cross the boundary
of loss; bitterness &
aggression
tied into a bow
around my neck,
pendant-like

watchful
for my own projections
of suffering

and mirroring
these back to my weakened
self

ideally,
i will surrender
to its contingency
fragility
and crumbling
pensive,
my sick bodyself
assembles
its own humanity
from scraps of
primal chaos and
formless lunar forces

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3 | HOME SCAPES

Expressive Landmark 3: February 7, 2023

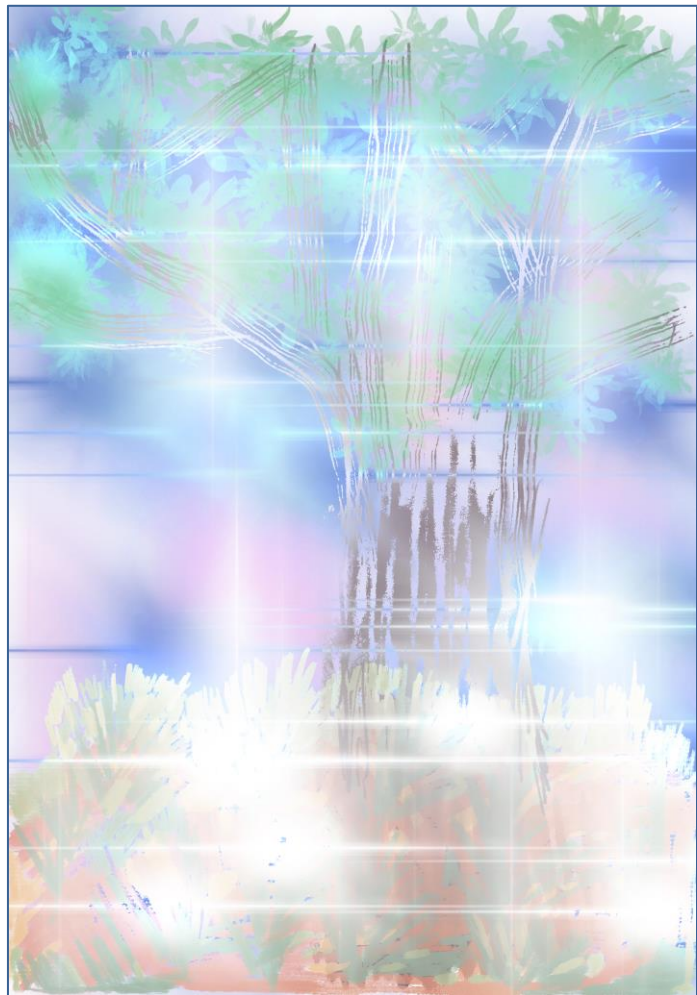
I trust the earth to hold me
 when I fall.
I will turn into dust
 when I am gone;
I trust my body will transform
into *breath*,
 into energy or fuel
 for another life.

I trust my body to tell me
 when I am not well.
I trust my body to keep me aware,
 to give me joy
even
if it is an ailing [container] for my soul.

Connected to the earth
through feet and breath,
I trust my body to tell me
 when I am healed.

I trust my kin to support me,
to carry me through
 History, through Time,
 through pain & hurt,
 when I am unable to stand.

My kin reflects back
 an image of me that
o p e n s my eyes to truths
 I cannot see.



Balinska-Ourdeva. (2023, March 18). *Bridging Earth & Sky* [Digital art]

**Early morning walk in the woods.
Stop.
Breathe in. Breathe out.**

Relaxed and focused yet porous. The feel of the earth in my palms, the feeling of trust coming from deep inside. Then, being lifted as a leaf toward the sky-kite, which morphs into a face on the painting I draw. A withered Pink Anthurium leaf-stem-body dancing, its wilted flower



Balinska-Ourdeva. (2023, February 7). *Dancing Body-Nature* [Oil pastels]

becoming a heart: I feel like a child again, playful and carefree. Fingers smudged in colours, rhythmic circular motions applying oil pastels onto paper. No preconceived idea of what will come. Just curious. Just open to what beckons. Blending colours, layering one on top of the other, Q-tips loosening edges within, smoothing what emerges without. Some vitality traveling back from the drawing into my own body.

Learning fluidity. The way of wind and water. Primeval flow from above and below. Grounded in earth, stretching all the way to the stars. Shimmering,

glistening, dew-drops on leaves in early morning.

Flowering blue butterflies blissfully flickering.



Altaring

Любовта на Старимайка (My Grandmother's Loving)

Ти ме научи да обичам,
защото
първите ласки които си спомням
тялото ми усети и разбра чрез
твое то насърчение, одобрение и грижа —
част от мен, която сега преоткривам.
Безотказна обич
и поддръжка.
Кротка, мълчалива, грижовна —
ти ми даде утеха и надежда, вяра
че мога да се справя.
Връзката ми с теб не само в миналото,
но и сега, ми е жизнено необходима.

According to my mom, my grandmother sang beautifully. I have never heard her sing. Her voice to this day I remember as quiet and soft. Yet, the love of music runs in my family. I cannot imagine who my grandmother was as a young woman: what pleased her and what saddened her, but the few anecdotes I know about her all paint a picture of shy wisdom burrowed in a loving heart, taking care of everyone without complaint and not asking for much. My grandmother seemed content in her ability to cook, garden, and nourish. She was an empathetic listener. As my mom testifies, my grandma was a trusted confidant to many women in the village where she lived before migrating to the capital city with my grandfather who wanted fresh opportunities for his family to live well. More anecdotes reveal other qualities I was unaware of when we lived together in a three-bedroom apartment my grandfather bought the year my brother was born.

My grandmother had two sisters, and the youngest one was afflicted with sciatica, so when my great-aunt said to her parents she wanted to pursue further education, they supported her to become a schoolteacher. Meanwhile, my maternal grandmother married at seventeen and started raising a family. According to a conversation with my mom, старимайка wanted to study after high school. I don't know what she dreamed of becoming, for my mom only mentioned that she had heard her mother say: "They [my parents] did not want to educate me." She must have had passions and aspirations to be more than what she was dealt because my mom remembered a time when her parents partook in a community improvised theatrical performance. As a child, or even as a young woman, my grandma liked to draw and was quite the artist. Sadly, there are no art pieces she left for us to relish and remember her by. My grandmother was also a volunteer in a grassroots medical organization the village doctor had formed, which might have caused a bit of family tensions, again based on what my mom recalls. Wanting to do something for her own personal growth rather than constantly serving the needs of others, my grandma's unrecognized and overlooked potential probably fuels my own fierce desire to be independent even years after her death.

My grandmother had been a chef at one of the most prestigious restaurants in Sofia back in the day. It was probably something she did before I was born, for I don't recall her going to work and coming home at odd hours, what I imagine would be the workday of someone in this profession. However, health issues led to an early disability retirement. The moments most clearly etched in my mind of my grandma being a workingwoman travel back to the years of my junior high and high school. I would return home in the late afternoon to find my grandpa at the kitchen table, making paper bags or cardboard boxes to be used as packaging in pharmacies and grocery stores. Warm and comfortable, the evenings buzzed with familial efforts to help my grandma in meeting

her daily quota. I remember gluing over two hundred paper bags in a single sitting before doing homework after supper. I must have been grade ten or eleven then. Conversations around the table flowed easily. When we were quiet, it was a reassuring silence, a silence of comfort. I see in my mind's eye the family circle: my grandma around the stove busy preparing the evening meal, my grandpa, my father, my younger brother, and I joking and laughing together as we competed who would win the first place finishing the batch of paper bags to be made that day. Observing from aside, one would not have detected the unresolved subterranean frictions of which I was oblivious at the time. The felt sense of my grandma's proverbial adhesive powers concealed what I now recognize was my mom's raw and festering wound, her trauma. A true matriarch, yielding a quiet and gentle authority, my grandma's unconditional love draped us blanket-like—a smooth, cosy, familiar, and peaceful coexistence making the family unit seemingly whole.

I was six years old when my pre-school music teacher took me to audition for The Children's Choir of the Bulgarian National Radio. Both in kindergarten and pre-school, I used to sing, together with the other kids, but also solo. I was not afraid or worried that I would get it wrong, that my pitch may be flawed. A deep bodyful (Caldwell, 2018) delight from letting my voice soar with force and fullness, filling the air with beautiful sounds is still alive. But, the joy was stifled. Similarly to my grandmother, my songs were silenced. I don't know what caused my grandma to stop singing, but my story picks up the pattern as I remember the years I spent rehearsing for concerts and tours with the children's choir. Not all of these are pleasant memories. They are mostly melancholy and regretful. Hence, the heart aches slightly as I feel the pull in the left side of the chest. The blues move down to my stomach, tightening into a knot of unresolved strain.

My grandmother's unsung beautiful voice runs within the familial energetic field. Even though what could have been an inspired unfurling of musical talent never became true for me, I feel its latent potency. In the summer of 2023 when I visited my family in Bulgaria, I met a former children's choir peer. His memories toned completely opposite to mine: he was grateful for the experience and fondly recounted funny moments when he was fined because of some silly boyish misdemeanour. All I remember are the tedious music theory exercises and the 'examinations' when our conductor would ask us individually to sing a passage from whatever musical piece we were rehearsing and then criticize our performance in front of everyone. A lot of "not good enough" messages were imprinted on my lungs and throat, vocal cords and airways, adding to a nascent fragile sense of self.

The tightness in my stomach now becomes a throbbing pressure. I know of my unexpressed musical nature because I sometimes sing in the shower. I have tried on occasion to hum to the radio when a favourite song is played, but my glee is not always appreciated. And so, I have forgotten the joy of using my voice in this way. But, the love for music, its potency to stir emotions I did not even know I felt, is still there: beneath the gravity of sadness, beneath the dense knot of shame. It is wrapped in regret but also in gratitude for being a part of me, even though not fully developed or actualized.

wondering
what would have been
had I given strength to my voice
had I followed its beauty
inherited
from my grandmother

the stifled song
resides in the unconscious
serving other needs

an attunement
with deep values
what defines me
at core

and a familial re-storying

to recover
what has been lost
yet living
in vocal cords
in breath
coming from within my belly

a powerful stream
of sounds light and full
expansion of ribcage
a scream or a moan
in tune
with the anger that
fills up the lungs

a musical phrase
of deep gratitude
for staying true to what
has not been expressed
and finding another way
to sing it
through paint, brush, and canvas
a digital pencil,
a screen

the passion for beauty still flowing
through my deep roots

November 28, 2023 – Journal entry

Finding my voice and empowering it is a healing path. On this path is also the need to rekindle a different relationship with sorrow, for it seems its profound presence in my life is my mother's legacy. Returning to the carefree state of youth, feeling the happiness of my little girl, singing and dancing, is the therapy. And I know I can do it! On November 13, 2023, I talked to mom and told her about the new health issues I was facing, and her first response was darkness. She stayed with it the whole time, but I resisted to go there, to join her in the metaphorical cave.

Avoiding the vortex of misery took a lot of energy. Yet I had a helper to sustain me: the funky purple turkey image, which is a subject of another writing. Her animated energy and cheerful gobbling carried me as I met with my friend, went grocery shopping to the Italian Center and had coffee with her afterwards, and in the evening, when I enjoyed a dinner at the Cactus Club Café with my husband. Noticing the abundances the day offered, what needed to happen happened so that I attuned to the light emotions in my heart and landed in my safe place, a place of power and vitality, of awe and beauty. The place where my grandma's beautiful voice resounds with love, strong and freely flowing.

As I talked to mom, I stood my ground. I spoke my truth. Though I am terrified by what awaits me, I don't have to dwell in the darkness, which presently I realize is a 'stuck,' frozen energy going back to the source of my mother's unhappiness. I could be petrified and fossilized if I keep taking it on, my mother's despair, her grief and guilt. But, her journey is not my journey. Her death-wish cannot be what I wish for because I want LIFE. While I have to allow space for Fear, to respect it, I also have to allow space for Hope because they are related. They are two sides of the same pattern. And for Hope to show up for me, I have to pray to it, feel it in every muscle and bone of my body.

To embody Hope is to take a risk. I am risking tailing a new direction, breaking the familiar familial pattern and paving a way for those who come after me to seek their own healing. I am proud of being able to resource myself. To nurture what needs nurturing, to feel what needs to be felt, to weed out what needs to be relinquished. Though I am still learning what it is that does not serve me anymore, I know that decoupling from my mother is one of the most important steps on this journey. Though I know her anguish, the lonely place she finds herself in, with no support, I cannot provide for her what she needs to provide for herself. The opposite of Fear is connection. And I cannot rebuild her connections. Nor should I.

I love you Mom! But I will climb out of the cave alone. I send you love back!

If praying is the emotional state I spend the most time in (Bernard, 2023), I want to pray to Joy. I want to pray to Love. I want to pray to connection. I don't want to pray to Fear. So, here is the written prayer:

- *The thought that takes me into the mental state: I want to heal in joy, and love, and inner peace.*
- *The emotion that is my power source: my inner child's delight.*
- *The outcome that is the fruit of my delight: healing of body, spirit, and mind.*

On this path, my grandma is my guide! And there are other helpers along the way, for which I am grateful.

I want forgiveness, in this unsent letter to my grandma, for I did not fully understand nor did I wholly appreciate the influence she had on me. She has been my unwavering support in all stages of my development: the picture of my grade one graduation spotlights her instead of my mom as the person to celebrate my success. My grandmother patiently waited for hours every week to fetch me from choral rehearsals and concerts. She rejoiced in all my achievements, consoling me when I was upset or distressed. My grandma was also the elderly wisdom to bestow on me the feminine knowledge of moon cycles and blood tides that mark the transition from childhood to womanhood. A yin energy so compelling, yet unobtrusive, I did not say a proper goodbye when she died, when her love retracted to the underground cave of my mother's grief, the furtive abode of our family trauma. And so, the home scapes are my asking for my grandma's forgiveness. I believe my words will reach her, and the cord connecting us will glow again with the intense red of kinship and love, her pride in me. Profound gratitude for everything she has imparted on me, everything she has awakened in me, I am sending back across time and space. GRANDMA, I LOVE YOU!



Scentscaping

Materials: Paprika, Turmeric, Cinnamon, Oregano, Rosemary leaves, and my cooking pot

Essential oils: Lemon, Rosemary, Japanese mint

Canvas: Cheesecloth

Photo filter: Line drawing





Balinska-Ourdeva. (2023, March 12). *Tasting Home* [Scentscape]

The softness of rain
against the hardness of earth
transforms;
 what is inside
 the womb-consciousness
grows,
 expands—
 a fiery ball that lands

in empty space: the calm
 emanating from a source
 unknown, yet knowable
 invisible, yet felt
 elusive, yet held,
 the eye that sees it all
when least
 expected;
the heart of

coming home
to rest
in kindness,
gratitude,
& love.

FLAIRSCAPING

A video chat with my mom on February 12, 2023 inspired this creative expression. We were discussing activities my dad and she could do together to stave off his progressing dementia. I thanked her for the gift of teaching me about colours and how to match them, for colour coordination is one of my favourite playful pastimes. So, the flairscape is dedicated to my mom who introduced me to beauty through her embroidery and tapestry (hanging on the bedroom wall), her knitting (although, it was my grandmother who taught me how to knit), her

delicious cooking and baking, and through reading stories from all over the world to me. I was probably four or five at the time when she bought me collections of folk tales from Japan, India, Russia, China, and Australia, each one with amazing illustrations. The Ancient Greek myths were a bedtime reading, and by the time I started school, I knew most of them by heart. My mom was also the person to teach me how to read at the age of four. My persistent fascination with mythology and archetypes probably is rooted in those first memories of being held, soothed, and lulled to sleep with any of those beautiful but also tragic and sometimes hauntingly violent stories. Last but not least is my mom's love for plants. A few weeks ago, she proudly showed me the nineteen blooming orchids in her apartment, arranged in a stunning plant stand my father built for her when he still had full control over the movements of his hands. My grandmother's and my mom's green thumbs hopefully have also passed onto me.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, February 12). *Rendering Beauty*
[Original photo-collage].



Balinska-Ourdeva. (2023, February 12). *Beauty Summoning*
[Original photo-collage re-rendered with Microsoft Word filters].

Soundscaping: Aural Mornings

Process & Intent

The aural images of the original soundscape “Aural Mornings” were captured over three days (February 10, 11, and 13, 2023), each morning recording the sounds associated with experiences that marked the day’s birth but also surprised me because I heard them with a more attuned and appreciative ear. An interior-exterior movement, with an in-between zone (our garage), is the organizing rhythm, for I first attended to the sounds of Helix breakfasting in our kitchen. Routinely, his meowing is the most audible tune to burst-open the night’s stillness and quiet in our home.

The next morning, while my husband pulled his car out of the garage to drive to the neighbourhood Starbucks for his regular dark roast black coffee and my white chocolate mocha drink, I heard birds chirping, and at the same time, the furnace kicked in, so I recorded both sounds from the transitional space of our garage. However, the photograph of our plum tree in bloom, with Helix climbing her branches, I used deliberately to enhance the sense of spring and revival I associate with the morning songs of birds.

A strong winter gust and a passing car on the third morning took me outside of the house and to the end of the street where I recorded the third aural image. The photograph of our front yard pear tree illustrates the seasons changing from spring to fall to winter while the bare branches hold space for the wind to dance or play.

Below is the original soundscape rendered visually. Expressive processes I engaged in at the Poetic Inquiry Workshop on 18 Feb. 2023, held at the University of Alberta, inspire the art piece. One of the presenters was Darlene St. Georges whose work I viewed on her online GAIA Gallery and decided to create an image capturing the sounds through shapes, colours, textures, lines, and a symbol: the feather and bird songs combined recall the symbolism of birds as messengers, harbingers of important events and giftings-offerings from the soul’s imaginal flights. The original soundscape exists on its own right as an act of gratitude for the Beauty that found me on these three mornings, but I have kept the same name for the soundscape re-imagined here: “Aural Mornings.”

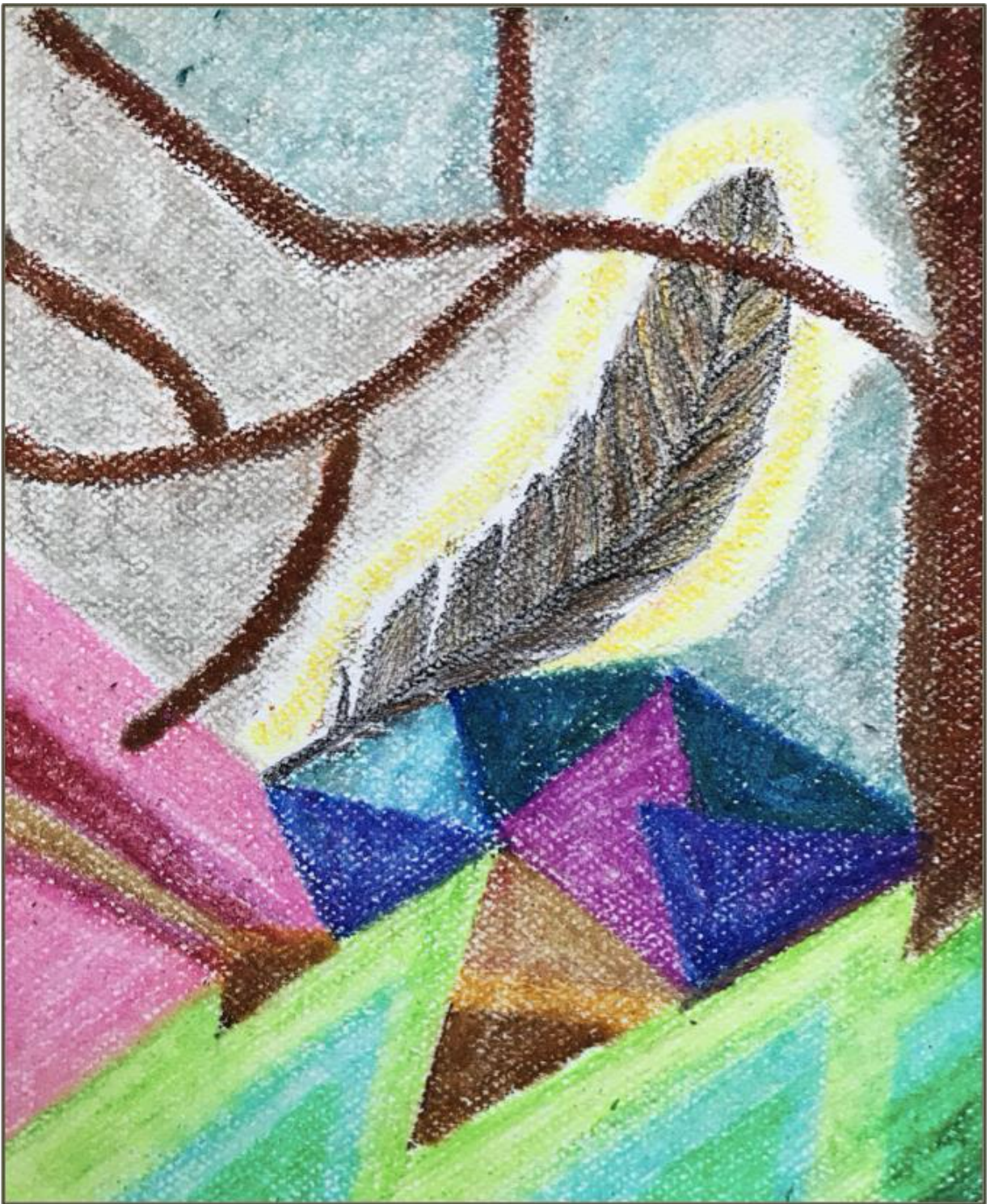
Legend *lime green, blue, and green (bottom)* – Helix’s meowing (morning bursts in)

pink, darker rose-pink and yellow-beige-brown shapes – Helix's food and his pink feeding plate, the crunching of kibbles and his delight
dark blue-green and violet – the clanking of his tag (turquoise in colour) on the plate while eating (a discordant, but dominant sound)
bird feather and yellow halo – the birds I heard chirping
greyish swirls (middle) – the wind and the car passing by
bluish-greyish (top background) – the sky on that morning when I captured the wind gust
brown tree – it is purposefully the foreground as it represents the external world, blending with the interior of the house, providing the framing and intersection of inner-outer realms, their merging and separation as the day / seasons / years / time passes by

Cat Wisdom

morning bursts in
meeow meow meow
the roundness of Life
unfolding

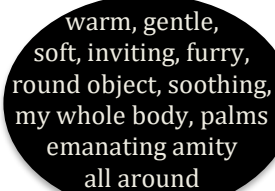
morning sounds
of delight
the fullness of Joy
prickling



Balinska-Ourdeva. (2023, February 19). *Aural Mornings* [Oil Pastels and pencil crayons]

Expressive Landmark 5: February 28, 2023

A black, furry, soft, yet firm in the center sphere I hold in my hands. Rendering, through the concrete poem's shape, the soothing roundness when my palms slightly press and gently squeeze: ex—hale—inhal—ex—hale—inhal pace.



warm, gentle,
soft, inviting, furry,
round object, soothing,
my whole body, palms
emanating amity
all around

Two Encounters: Returning to September 9-10, 2012

A memory hitches to the soft furry ball my hands cradle. A rabbit and a squirrel. Two encounters I have forgotten about, but the body has stowed them away. Animal spirits visiting and reminding me of the Great Circle, of my place within the web-of-Creation. In a circular fashion, I am embracing the signs of my interconnectedness with “all things in Nature” (Lake-Thom, 1997, p. 37), seeking an understanding of their pedagogical implications.

The rabbit I found in my front yard on that autumn day eleven years ago was a surprise. He made me think of the possibility of occupying the same space and connecting with different species, the tuning that happened in both of us in order to co-exist. The rabbit was not afraid of me, and I had to suppress my frustration at having to repair what he had destroyed by digging a hole in the middle of the flowerbed, removing all of the mulch, spreading it around on the stones, and making a resting spot for himself. My husband and I spent a lot of time landscaping that summer, so the rabbit's intrusion into our space felt like a serious violation. Of course, my response was rather foolish, as I have no authority over the land or the resources available to the rabbit to meet his natural needs so that he continues to be a thriving rabbit. I was acting silly, clearly constrained by internalized sense of superiority and possessiveness of the kind that only could distract me from fully experiencing the beauty of what happened after my initial response. While I was weeding, the rabbit kept resting on the ground, and there was a moment of perfect harmony, of being together in an instant of shared peace, which my husband tried to capture on camera unsuccessfully.

Revisiting the encounter from eleven years ago, I am challenged to think about peaceful co-existence in the context of pedagogical practices that foster intercultural and interspecies

competencies. A naïve understanding that a teacher has enough time to study the various cultures of the students who come to her classroom misplaces the whole notion of intercultural competency while interspecies relationships the educational system obviously sidesteps. Yet, awareness of the diversity of cultural practices is necessary as a starting point for any communication about learning. The purpose of students and teachers is to engage in the process of knowledge acquisition—schools transmit knowledge and train young people in the skills and mental habits, as well as the discipline and work ethic involved in pursuing knowledge and becoming a professional. If we think of the content areas as introduction to the way of thinking characteristic for a particular discipline, by giving students a taste of what mathematicians do, or literary critics do, or historians do, or chemists do, we are asking them to explore possibilities to engage with the world through the lens of a particular profession, or livelihood, which is an insignificant aspect of what formal schooling is about. Someone mentioned today that school was about learning how to learn, and I cannot deny it, but my question is: does culture function only as a source of background knowledge? Or, is there a better chance to negotiate our differences once we realize that culture is invented, that the practices we hold dear are products of traditions perhaps irrelevant to the current times because the realities they served when invented are no longer part of the historical context of the human condition? The emphasis on difference is going to produce, in some cases, only more stubborn identity reifications, but it is a fact that contemporary educational contexts are defined, at least in North America, by a desire to standardize, to endorse a rationalist model of thinking, and to scientificize—we indoctrinate our children to believe the only way to know reality is through western scientific narratives and the power they grant us to understand the world. We make them believe in the grand illusion that pragmatic achievements in making Life more convenient, more efficient, and more materialistic are true measures of human progress. A “progress trap” (Wright, 2004). On reflection, the rabbit teaches me a different vision of what the world might look like if I were to embrace the Land’s reconciliation principles of being and becoming (Hains, 2023).

The classroom affords multiple *loci* where students encounter the human condition. We invite students to absorb various stories telling of the ways human beings exist in the world and interact with the physical reality that confines their lives (environmental dimension). The scientific accounts of the relationships humans have with the Earth and other beings are myths in the same way the ancient humans invented stories to explain their world. Concrete cultural practices create the structures within which we are embedded as symbolic animals and inexorably define our social realities (social dimension). The existential situation underpinning our presence in this particular

space-time is our shared psychosomatic commonality (psychological dimension). So, acclimatizing our differences within a shared pedagogical context invites a realization we are all in it together. We do not teach content areas, we teach Life. Re-circling to the rabbit and the way we coexisted in close proximity: we adjusted to being with each other without any explicit or direct need to acknowledge our differences; my hope is one day all human beings to come to the awareness that it is possible to coexist peacefully and respectfully of our diverse ways of life without harming, discriminating, and demonizing the Other.

Another encounter concerns the little squirrel that scuttled before me on the way to the University of Alberta Education building, again making me think about the reality that we co-inhabit with other species and their adaptive strategies, adjusting without compromising their nature, to the changes humans have imposed on their habitats. We walk the same way, the way of Life, and the different routes we can take are varied, but the milestones bookending the journey are the same for all. However, it is almost impossible to constantly maintain this awareness of interconnectedness ... a concept, which in itself is hard to grasp intellectually. Yet, the body knows the truth energetically.

Application of the “placyfulness” concept: A temporary art creation

The idea for the piece came to me as I observed Helix, our feline child, snow-play in the back yard. He has left his imprints on the pristine whiteness of the deck as well. And so, I thought about the tracks that animals have been leaving on this land for millennia: learning how to follow and interpret them was, perhaps, the origin of human symbolic thinking, morphing such marks into signs and metaphorical re-presencing (Valliant, 2010, pp. 236-237). We learned about space by travelling along the paths of rivers and blooming-fruited plants. We learned about time by worshipping the agelessness of rocks and mountains, the depths of lakes and caves. And so, we became storytellers.

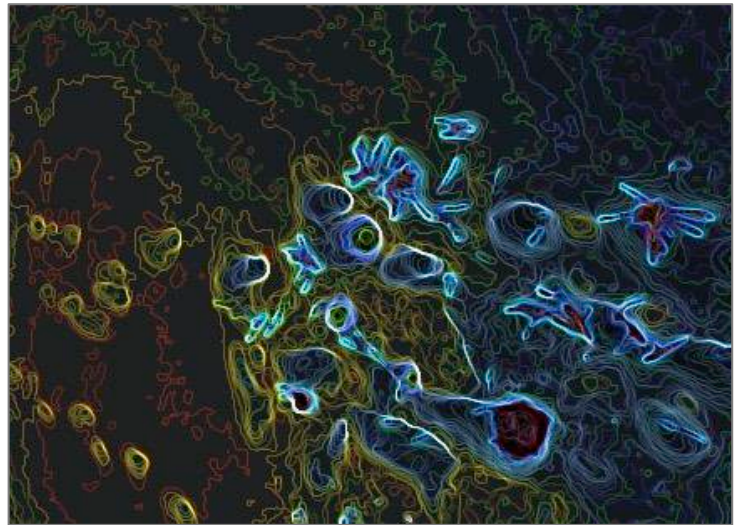


Balinska-Ourdeva. (2023, January 16). *Pilgrimage*
[Temporary art]

Letting go is a process of forgetting, delegating to the deepest recesses of memory what no longer stirs or affects us consciously. It is not an easy process, but it is a sacred one, always an invitation for a spiritual transformation. The *Pilgrimage* composition attempts to capture the ‘essence’ of the act of letting go, but then, to further the exploration by meditating on how the memories, habitual patterns of emotional and behavioural responses, stories, and ‘self’ reside in the unconscious, a fertile ground for re-awakening, re-discovery, re-invention, re-configuring, re-imagining, re-creation. Side by side, the two pieces *Pilgrimage* and *Sonar 1* are set to express the complementary nature of holding onto (remembering and reverence) and letting go (forgetting but also forgiving). Yet, if I think about the psychological individual and collective depths and the *anima mundi* (the Soul of the world), the traces, trails, and tracks of what we have let go always remain in the shadowed aspects of our present bodies and through the generations of ancestors who have lived on this planet. But, we need the sonar of awareness to illuminate and reveal them, and so be altered, and in the process, changing us, and thus perpetuating the Great Round of birth-growth-decay-death-rebirth.

What I am learning from Helix is to be. Not simply exist in the present moment, but being in my depth, knowing it fully. Every movement he makes radiates his catness. Patience. Alertness. Awareness. Surrender. Bowing to the instinctive impulses and keeping himself safe. He waited for hours, stalking a prey: a young vole he brought to the house who managed to escape Helix’s deadly claws by hiding under the stove. Helix’s quiet endurance of pain. His strength and agility in pursuing the best course of action in any given moment when roaming the neighbourhood. I cannot but admire the profundity of his attunement to the environment. His piercing focus. His easy content. His knowing of when to hold on to his pursuit and when to let go.

The various homescapes are landing me home in a place of connection: my grandma’s love, my mom’s appreciation of beauty, our cat, the surrounding world in its exquisiteness and riches, offerings to my soul, not simply ‘therapeutic’ but essential for my wellbeing. Feeling my place in the



Balinska-Ourdeva. (2023, January 16). *Sonar 1*. [Photograph re-rendered with Microsoft glow filter]

web-of-Creation is a wonder, and the only attitude appropriate in relation to the land and the non-human world beyond is awe and reverence. An awareness of my limitations humbles me and helps me find the ethical standpoint from which I can offer my attention to what sustains me. “The awakening roar of Beauty” (Atkins, 2022, p. 23) is loud. It can be heard from a long distance, in two different locations at the same time: it is a thick cord uniting me with my land of origin and the land I currently inhabit. I am firmly walking the path of recovery and restor(y)ation. Старимайче, ти си моя водач. Благодаря!

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4 | PLANT WISDOM

Expressive Landmark 6: January 12-20, 2023

“Life’s Dance”

15-10-2022

Life’s dance:

 one step forward
two steps backward,

the motion swaying you relentlessly,
carried by wind
and rustling leaves.

The yellowing branches of the pear tree,
their orange-red tinge
glowing
 like a nimbus

when you d
 e
 s
 c
 end the stairs
from bedroom to living room.

The window opens a vista
constantly changing,
speaking an ancient language of splendour
through signs, symbols, curled up hunches.

Wisdom enters the heart —

budding tentacles of gratefulness
extend from you to the universe.

Calling the name of a nameless force
pulsing through in rhythmic waves,
in one swift motion
you take the first step
 at once propelled
backwards → forwards
 backwards and
 forwards.

Life’s way to unfurl you into knowledge

in constant oscillation
 between roots and sky canopy
 between then, now and after.

“The Pear Face of Grace”

14-01-2023

A glorious vista greets me
& lifts the heart,
heavy with anguish—
 an exhausting
 downward climb—
the stairs descent but my feet
 fAIter:
a weak Achilles reflex response,
numbness along the outer side
of right thigh & calf,
shootingarrows, pins&needles
 jolting
nerves & muscles
 TENSING
My eyes are fixed on the Pear
Tree outside, playing with the wind,
embracing the autumn sun,
 its amber-leafed afterglow
 radiant
 against a baby-blue expanse.
My heart swells—grace-impregnated,
 full of grace,
 grateful.

I reclaim gratitude
 & kindness,
smoothing the grater of
 grief,
 grudge,
 & guilt,
returning me to a child-like state of
resplendent reverie & marvel.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, January 19). *The Pear Face of Grace*.

Expressive Landmark 7: January 14-31, 2023



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, January 15). *Perpetuity/Вечность*.

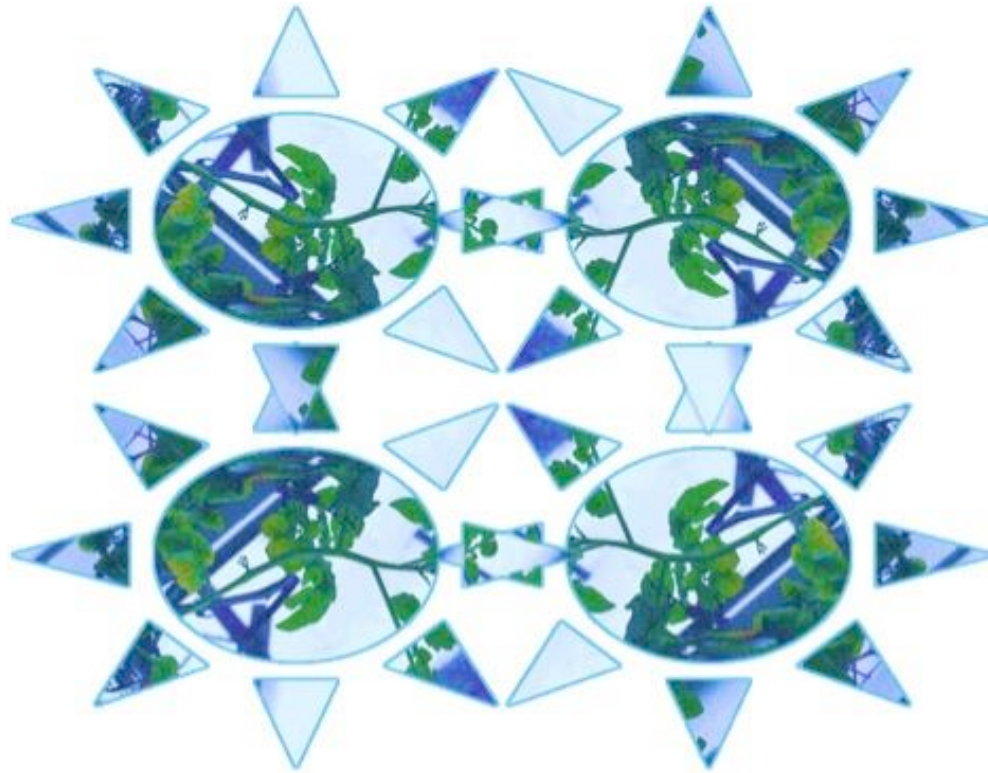
Plant Wisdom

*Letting go of something cannot ensue without holding onto something that was. The Life cycle, in a spiral fashion, is about transformation. The image *Perpetuity/Вечность* is an attempt to render tangible the perspective that allows me to join in and witness the incessant flux of birth, growth, death, and metamorphosis leading to new birth, ad finitum. Reflecting on the changes that had to happen prior to producing the photo-art piece, I am able to identify a juncture, which became the original topos or intersection of paths: the actual tomato plant, which my husband and I nurtured over the summer in a pot on the deck of our house, a gift from our son and his girlfriend. The mother-plant entered our lives and we entered hers. In mid-September, when the temperatures fell below 12° C, I would bring her into our home and place her next to the window, to stay warm and safe by spending the night inside the house (not her natural habitat), sheltered from the cold open-air. The next morning, I would move her outdoors again to bask in the golden-tinged glow of the sun. Our care and*

attention, while temporarily stalling her death, could not avert her fate. The mother-plant is dying as the brittle leaves and withered-weathered stem bespeak. But she also lives in the fruit she has produced. When I took a picture of her last child (still ripening as I write this reflection), time froze, and with this one action, I changed how this particular tomato plant was, is, and will be in the world: no longer a living being, but a representation, a present-ness afresh in a virtual form. A transmutation. The image could have stayed the way it was, a photographic slice in the fabric of time the camera captured at a particular and unique intersection of related presences: human and device, plant, air, light, texture, and, most importantly, feeling. When I took the picture, I hoped that it would express my fascination: the mother-plant was—and is—the first being I seek to lay eyes on as I enter the kitchen in the morning, prepare breakfast and sit with my husband at the table in her field of vision. She faces me and I face her, a mirror image, two different but interconnected realities.

The aging and wilting body of this mother-plant speaks the same language as my own ailing body. My fears, worries, and my future being, reflected in her letting go yet holding onto the life she is still responsible for. Looking at the photograph now, I wonder: does she intuit my distress? Does she intuit my desire and unconditional love, the fierce protectiveness of the only human child I delivered to Life? I wonder about the strength and tenacity needed to die with dignity, giving every last ounce of blood, nutrients, and support to our offspring. I wonder what she can teach me about when the right time to let go of Life is. Maybe I am a little envious of her for being so effortlessly hinged to Life but not dreading Death. Looking at the actual plant and the image, the contrast between the lushness of the last green branch, the youthful brightness of the small red tomato-child, and the knotted, gnarled many-hands of the tomato-mother plant amazes me again and again. She teaches me how to embody and trust the paradox of loss: it pains but also nourishes. And most significantly: it transforms. Plant wisdom bestowed on me without expectations, no strings attached.

I witness it and am humbled by it every time I look at the plant or her artistically rendered image. I also realize at this moment that my experimentation with colours and filters, brightness and contrast, added another dimension to our unfolding togetherness. Sharing the art piece with others will continue the process of both holding onto and letting go, and the way the photo-art affects those who see it, will be a perpetuation of the plant's life cycle in a spiritual way, through which she becomes a transcendent, mythopoetic presence—a symbol. Permanent and impermanent, transient and timeless, the mother-tomato plant continues to be a part of the ebb and flow of energy: transformation, transfiguration, transubstantiation, transcendence—the alchemical lifeblood of Creation.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, January 15). *Winter Mandala* [Photo art].

The secret powers vulnerability bestows

Shrewd and resourceful: these are the qualities Amiee Nezhukumatathil (2020, pp. 25-27) admires in the exotic plant *Mimosa pudica*, which she first encounters as a child in the Chicago Botanic Garden. Reflecting on the tropical shrub's biological ingenuity and resilience, the author marvels at the lessons she learns from the plant as an adult.

Initially, the narrator describes the touch-me-not plant as a beautiful and sensitive being who becomes distressed and shuts down when touched. The plant's flowers, "spherical" in shape and "lavender-pink" in colour (p. 25), draw the reader's attention to her beauty and shy demeanour. Lavender is a soft, light purple colour that has a gentle and delicate feel to it while pink is a feminine hue highlighting the shrub's bright and graceful nature. The narrator further emphasizes the plant's delicacy and shyness when she mentions the humble plant's unusual reaction to touch. Identifying it as a "shudder" and a "shake" (p. 25), the narrator implies the plant's displeasure, even fear, subtly conveying the shrub's revulsion and discomfort when her boundaries are violated. Cautious, she

folds her feather-like leaves inward and droops. Additionally, because the narrator compares the plant to someone who “doesn’t want to spill a secret ” (p. 25), alluding to a person who prefers their privacy, the impression that the plant is fragile and discreet is stressed even more. Therefore, the opening of the essay compels the reader to imagine an attractive but delicate and vulnerable living organism that collapses even if the touch is tender and light.

However, despite her seeming fragility and delicate nature, the touch-me-not plant is clever and able to outsmart those who want to prey on her. The narrator relies on juxtaposition and irony to represent the hidden power of the perennial shrub, stressing her surprising strength and resilience. In this section of the essay, the narrator portrays the plant as cunning and in control, showcasing her subversive biological defenses: the leaves collapsing and folding inward is an adaptive trick to shake off insects, such as “carpenter worms and spider mites” (p. 26), who want to feed on her leaves. The narrator’s delight clearly surfaces here because she discovers that the plant’s fearful reaction is actually an ingenious tactic of self-defence. What initially appears to be a distressed response to touch is now revealed to be a resourceful and “elegant” (p. 26) but nonetheless dangerous attack on any unwanted predator or intruder. An astute reader will not miss the double meaning of the word “elegant,” referring to the plant’s deft and effective protective movement.

Next, the narrator discusses the plant’s adaptability to new environments, pointing out the antithetical attitudes people have towards her. The fast growing shrubs some humans perceive as harmful because they spread wildly, and so, those living in places where the *Mimosa pudica* is native, consider her a weed. Yet, she is not only useful, being a “neutralizer for [snakes] venom,” but her exotic and “whimsical” (p. 26) beauty attracts many who want to make their homes more elegant and charming. No one, besides the narrator, however, is aware of or appreciates the plant’s resourcefulness, capacity to control her fate, and resilience.

Unlike others, the narrator maintains a long lasting fascination with the touch-me-not plants because of the lessons she learns from them. As a child, the narrator’s ambivalent attitude—both fear and delight (p. 25)—conforms to the stereotypical human beliefs about the sleeping grass. Yet, as an adult, her fascination only grows when she discovers the *Mimosa pudica* is an inspiring role-model. Comparing herself to the plant, Nezhukumatathil wishes that she possessed the plant’s ingenuity and boldness to fend off unwanted advances and forced intimacy in her life. The narrator’s desiring, perhaps even envious tone expresses her appreciation for having understood the plant’s wisdom: “what a thrill” (p. 27) is an exclamation revealing the narrator’s aspiring and admiring attitude toward the sensitive plant. The noun “thrill” signals a sudden, pleasurable tingling sensation

running through the narrator's entire body. Stylistically, the emphatic phrase reinforces the wonder of the plant's teachings, which the narrator enthusiastically embraces. The lessons, aptly, are embodied in the name of the plant she honours with her essay. "Touch me not" becomes a refrain that resonates powerfully through the last part of Nezhukumatathil's personal piece, imprinting the plant's wisdom both in the narrator's and the reader's mind.

The final echoing words "touch them not" (p. 27) resemble an incantation that solidifies the narrator's desire to assert her boundaries and the boundaries of her children, as well as the autonomy and privacy of all who are vulnerable, shy, and delicate in the world. Her firm and resolute diction in the use of the verb "decide" (p. 27) gives off the feel of an unwavering conviction. Added to "let," which expresses permission, the narrator subtly suggests that the one in control of the permissible action is the person who makes the decision: the narrator, her children, the children of other people. Inspired by the plant, Nezhukumatathil now realizes she has the power to assert her boundaries and have others respect them, just like the touch-me-not plant unequivocally enacts her position regarding intruders and predators who infringe on her personal space.

The lessons of the humble plants are gentle but firm, delicate yet cunning, giving hope to those who are vulnerable and weak. Though the plants may appear powerless, ingenuity is their strength. Their resilience and subversive abilities are inspiring for humans who fail to notice their own capacity to stand their ground. And so, in her brilliant personal essay Aimee Nezhukumatathil offers the readers a beautiful metaphor to remind them of the secret powers that vulnerability bestows.

Expressive Landmark 8: January 24, 2023 – Coming home

Over the past three weeks, a consciousness transformation I have been undergoing since the onset of sciatica and the CML diagnosis is complete, for I finally landed home last night. Journaling helped me to unpack an unconscious pattern at last fully emerging from the depths. It is initiating a re-writing of my personal and familial story, as well as offering a medicine for my wounded soul. The body map I drew represents an aspect of my wholesomeness (the polyvagal theory of trauma will probably name it as operating from the ventral vegal comfort zone) and the sensations-feelings-images my body enfleshes when in this state. I drew a body map to capture them as a reminder when the state is gone. Not clinging to it, but holding it in the mind's eye as a place of power, a

locus of healing energies that allows me to connect to my wellbeing and deepest truths.

Blue, green, and baby blue lines on the body map externalize the calmness and centeredness I have experienced for more than a week. Nested hearts symbolize my opening up to love and the world, my increased sociability and compassionate relationality to others, starting with my husband to whom I feel more connected, but this relationality also expands the circle to my friends, and to my family—particularly to my dad—in Bulgaria, and finally, to all others suffering in the world. Bright brown colouring under my feet calls forth an image of the Earth because I feel grounded in my body: embodied. I think I finally understand what the word refers to since now there is a felt sense to its meaning. Olfactory and gustatory sensations (the smell and taste of the muskmelon I shared with my mom and dad in 2009, the thick sweetness and sticky juiciness which I have described elsewhere) also signal the state I describe as “landing home.” The yellow radiating light within the largest heart symbolically represents the feeling of delight and joy I experience in my body when I have landed home. Tactile markings, too, add to the somatic topography of my wellbeing / core self. (The feel of my tacky fingers as I grab another piece of the delicious muskmelon; Helix’s fur soft against the whorls of my fingertips as I slowly caress his head between the ears, gliding my hand lightly and rhythmically along the coat on his back). Joining in are auditory markings (the humming of trees, shrubs, grasses and air during my solitary walk in Pirin Mountain a few years back; Helix’s purring, cuddled in my lap while I am typing the current reflection); and finally, the vibrations (the nerve pulses of my sciatica and their talk—jolting, zapping, buzzing pin-pricking that is no longer loud though still present). These vibrations and electrical pulses translate in sensations of tightness or stiffness as the muscles of my right calf contract in order to protect the damaged nerve. The numbness all along the outer side of the right leg and the slight swelling below the knee, too, are its talk under pressure.

January 26, 2023: Time-loop

To finish is to begin. Unexpectedly returning to origins, a desire for reunion, a reinvention, provoking it. Funny how I am drawn to authors who struggled with language because they did not own it. It was not their mother tongue. They learned the clumsiness of words and the pain of hiding behind sentences structured awkwardly in the urge to shore an emotion. To grasp, to behold. How long can one dwell in the spaces between two representations of reality? The slicing of the world doubled, and sometimes tripled, through an exposure to translated sounds and accents. The words

still come in one choice only. Measured like spoons full of liquid, uncertainty, and the risk of misunderstanding hanging over the doomed little soul.

How did it happen so I started thinking in English? How does a person think outside the limits of a particular language? The gradual closing of consciousness, born, or rather marked by signified significances and meanings the sounds attracted centuries ago. Locally developed forms of familiar noise, prescribed like medicine in precisely measured quantities, a panacea. It is sad to forget a language. The lack of practice leaves me in a void filled with social bonds that mean little outside of a frame imposed by interactions I force upon myself. A blank... Writing does not help. Another blank...

Learning a new language places me in a situation of dependency and regret. Mournfully, I discover the impossibility for change even though I might embrace the novelty of the world seen afresh. What is it in the new language that helps reinvent me as someone I don't recognize but feel comfortable with? Even though it is difficult to express, the pain of this birth is not bloody, yet only those who have lived it can verify it. The body writing itself out of sounds clasped hard in the mouth and released with cautious, almost warily precision, like a youngster learning to walk. The feeling of a burning, heavy thumping when the calluses in my brain form—the brain being a senseless organ—I feel them ascend to the hardness of the skull. Each language has its own rhythms, maybe the same rhythm that dictates the forming of thoughts, the link between a word and its meaning, arising from the shaky, slippery soil of sensations. Forget!

Where does one begin when expressing suffering? It is usually quiet and deep, all consuming. Clothing pain in words is like—drawing another blank. Perhaps because until now I have not experienced pain as deep as a river. The waterfall of pain—captured in a glass of water—reminds me of the obscure (and possibly never existing) poem by Dali: “Ophelia drowns in a glass of water.” I read it in a Bulgarian translation, sounding bogus now, like a false memory stuck in the boot of my previous self. I invent the memories of a past that is more interesting than I recognize, or may be duller. The stories I cannot tell push forward in a file, as if soldiers determined to win the battle with the blank. The creative part of me trickling out and letting me know the unconscious embarrassment of mediocrity, hidden in the pretentious folds of thoughts controlling me without expression, beyond reach.

How does one write pain? In beauty. Metaphors screaming the unbearable. Its profoundness. Its anguish. The overshadowing loneliness when in the throes of pain. Others' compassion and pity grate my hands, powerless to refuse it. And yet, I am alone, enclosed in a tight,

There is nothing wrong with compassion, but there is an element of inauthenticity to it. A fake-ness I cannot pinpoint, spearing it with the sharp pike of disdain and loss. The body in pain is soul-true. The feeling is overpowering; one has no chance of ‘discoursing’—posing for others. Pain is selfish but genuine. To sacrifice the frankness of it is to mask it with words, to clothe it in gowns of unbecoming luxury. Words make it into a pose—a statue grotesquely ascending into oblivion and tolerance, a gesture of defeat. Hands clasped, whether for a prayer or for a scream. Pain is the body’s complete mobilization before Death. Arrows pointed to a poisonous end, liberating of the responsibility to be, to exist, because pain is a good excuse for the termination of life. If it is insufferable and the state will not improve.

This morning the symptoms revealed their symbolic meaning as well.

Blessed Bleeding Blight

blessed bleeding blight
marking my body
wounded
i discover a bent in the road ahead
slowly
gingerly
opening
to an unknown direction
a flower blooming

still glorious
even when diseased

when inner light shines
the flesh remembers

before the wounding
before the blight

the call from the other side
where darkness resides
in a tiny smut

it grows rusts the tissue
silently incrementally

drawing a line between two worlds

when we lose longing
we lose one being
only to discover what lies beneath the skin

shattered pieces
a broken sacred vessel of life

putting the body back together
one must know what the whole was

The painting below also pays respects to the profound unveiling of ancestral traces that led to this particular juncture in my consciousness transformation. Three different healing energies intersect at this metaphorical crossroads: my great-grandmother's healing powers which I feel re-awakened and presently stirring in me (possibly, a recovered connection to Hekate's energies that I carry within me via my maternal ancestral line); Helix's robust and spirited *yang* vitality complementing my great-grandmother's *yin* wisdom, and the cradling, accepting, grounding, and so healing, energy of Mother Earth. The shift feels like a tectonic re-adjustment of plates, which allowed the unconscious to become conscious, so I could find a way back to my soul-true being and embodied experiences of wellness.

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5 | THE HONEY OF REJECTION

Expressive Landmark 9: March 7, 2023 – May 10, 2023

Befriending the inner Saboteur

'Before and after'—a complex relationship with the inner critic. A recovering perfectionist, befriending him was a struggle, but now I converse with him (meet the Disciplinarian), taking his advice only after checking how his suggestions sit in my solar plexus, the soma-place where tension, pressure, or knots body-speak if I am not attuned to core being.

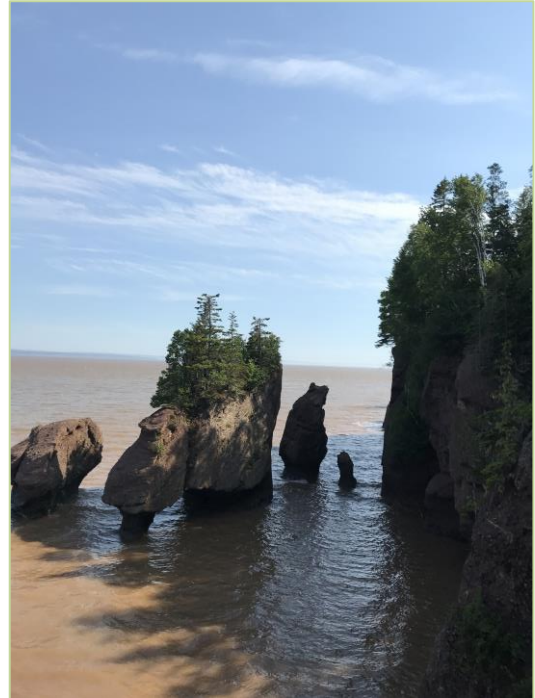
For this particular creative adventure, the Disciplinarian is silent; the inner child has taken over. My three-four year old self is playful. With tools beyond her age, she and I synchronize. The original photograph minus the background produces an intriguing shape: we are copying and pasting it four times. Experimenting with figure rotation, photo filters and recoloring, juxtaposing and fitting edges and gaps, overlaying forms, my inner girl is fascinated. Absorbed, full of my younger self, I welcome the organic, intent-less, titillating image, an emergent invitation for further altering. Light, warm, goose-bumpy tingling of delight, spreading from my hands, along the arms, across my shoulders, and through my chest, filling my inner girl with a *whoosh* sensation from head to toes when I upload the distorted photograph to my new iPad, and she abandons herself to the thrill of playing with the Procreate app, adding reed and twig strokes, using the paper daisy flower brush to shape a bouquet for Mom. My body receives the image's energy: happy to be this way. At this precise moment, the inner child and the Disciplinarian nod at each other ... and smile. The clock shows 6:35 pm when I lift my head and look.

The image is done.





Balinska-Ourdeva, V. *Bay of Fundy* [Distorted photograph].



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2018). *Bay of Fundy* [Original photograph].

This is not the only time my inner girl and the Disciplinarian, cooperating, have beckoned a veiled truth to come out. Perhaps, the Disciplinarian longs for softening, for melting of defenses, “I”-consciousness slipping away, the body responding to its own desire for wholeness and joy. Perhaps, the Disciplinarian longs for acceptance and recognition as a protector, surely outmoded and overzealous, but desiring room and integration.

~

“[P]reverbal, ‘infantile’ processes” manifest first in body-sensations when instinct, affect, and sensory perception coalesce to bring forth an image or memory (Brinton Perera, 1981, p. 57)

“[A] path to wellness is not outer directed but inner generated” (St. Thomas & Johnson, 2007, p. 22)

I am sitting in the car after my dream group’s meeting. During the conversation, and in a dream I had on October 13, 2015, a male figure appears. He is stern and icy-blue eyed. Slim, fit, and snow-haired. His muscles are tight, tense, rigid. His entire posture exudes stiffness. A long imaginary

stick keeps his back straight. A beeline. He has an aura of authority. He knows best. The event that sent him to the unconscious is cloaked in dis-remembrance, but I recognize his familiar presence. He has visited my dream space earlier, manifesting as a King and a faceless man. The Disciplinarian. He sits in the passenger seat as I drive back home. It is dark. I am straining to follow the road while fixing my imaginal eye on him. I am quiet, and he is silent. Unsmiling. His head faces frontwards. The stillness between us feels urgent. Something wants shifting, moving, freeing, fleeing.

My fellow dream group members have given me suggestions, possible interpretations of the night vision that summoned this figure. My Saboteur. One of many. My dislike of the “bullying ego”—goal-oriented, to-do driven, get-it-done perfectionist I have been since I can remember. As a small child, I was trained to be punctual, well behaved, helpful, studious, attentive, outstanding—putting my best effort without expecting praise or a compliment. The list continues: obedient, caring, polite, never talking back, never expressing strong emotions, unobtrusive, honest, trustworthy, diligent, excelling at school. Right now, as an adult, I require of myself to be kind, strict, punctual, understanding, helpful, loving, caring, reliable, independent, loyal, open-minded, compassionate, smart, knowledgeable. As I look at both lists, I feel my chest tensing, constricting. My throat narrows, blocked, a phlegm accumulating, barricading the air stream coming out with each exhale. The lists are lo-o-o-o-ong. Is it possible to be all these things, all at the same time? A thought ascends from a deep brownish-black knot settled way down the ribcage at the base of the sternum. Sometimes, being unkind is the kind thing to do, but then comes the guilt. The apology. The regret. The brownish, blackish knot in my solar plexus grows tighter. The fear of my grandfather, the image beneath my Disciplinarian, my Saboteur. Sitting in the car, I look at him directly and see the features relax. The ice-cold stare melts into a pool of violet blue light. My great-grandmother’s eyes. And the soft humming of bees, my grandpa’s favourite pastime, vibrates in my ears. Intense, sweet smell of acacia, my favourite tasting honey, drifts in the air. I smell summer. My grandfather’s firm hand holding my tiny palm, walking together amidst green grass on an unpaved trail. I am safe.

~

My maternal grandfather found comfort among the bees. He talked to them, he listened to them, he cherished their wisdom. With them, he did not have to pretend to be strong and dependable, for the power to protect and guide the whole family rested on his shoulders. He had to be a giant to ward off all the unpleasantness the world had to offer. In this lifetime, he changed many professions: a soldier during WWII, a fireman when he moved from his native village of Litakovo to the capital city, Sofia. There are gaps in my reminiscence, but I remember him carrying

heavy furniture up stairs on his shoulders when he worked as a mover for a furniture store in downtown Sofia, disassembling, packing, loading and unloading, bracing with his body precious new purchases for other people's homes as he delivered them to their doors. Then, he worked for the National Railroad Company, followed by a stint at the construction of the highest bridge the Bulgarian government built on the motorway Hemus (A2), connecting Sofia and Varna, travelling all the distance from west to east on the county's infrastructure map. My grandfather would wake up early and leave the apartment to catch a special bus that took him to his job, more than fifty kilometers away from where he lived. Everyday he travelled, returning at dusk. Everyday, no weekends to rest, cold weather or hot, back and forth, for years. He retired as a construction worker at the age of fifty-six.

I now understand his sternness and strictness were meted out of love.

My grandfather was looking out to keep me safe because this was how he was raised. A traditional patriarchal family of shepherds, sheltered in the mountains, life divided between inflexible gender roles and responsibilities to ensure survival. Industriousness he valued as the most important personality trait: “залудо работи, залудо не стой.” I remember he often repeated this proverb. And, I circle back to his symbol: the bees.

In ancient Egypt, bees represented creativity and wealth. The parable of Samson (Judges 14:8) solidifies the same meaning (Cirlot, 2001, pp. 23-24). In ancient Greece, they were praised for their obedience and hard work. This is what my Disciplinary-saboteur has always demanded of me. Playfulness and the freedom to walk weightless, so see light, to feel joy is allowed only when the work is done. When duties and responsibilities are fulfilled.

Yet, in the Orphic belief system, a mythological lineage most directly linked to my ethnicity, bees are symbols of souls, a spiritual meaning shared also with Indo-Aryan and Muslim traditions (Cirlot, 2001, p. 150). Connected to bees, of course, is honey, a symbol of wisdom—the product of great sacrifice and strenuous efforts, its production—an intricate alchemical process. There is hardly any higher knowledge without suffering, and it seems to me, my maternal grandfather, the beekeeper, had lived a life of great suffering. His death was excruciatingly painful, and though I did not witness the agonizing physical decline he endured in his last days, for I had given birth to my son only six months before, and as a new mother, was preoccupied taking care of the baby, his loss to this day feels enormous.

My grandpa was a honey-tongued storyteller.

A complex man. I remember one evening, sitting with старитатко in the front room of my great-grandmother's house in Litakovo. I am looking at the flames of a lit candle. It is a quiet summer night. I am not sure why the candle is lit, but the yellow-orange-red glow is just what I need, a mystical dance of moving energy, flickering, flaming, rising and falling as the wick slowly burns. I am mesmerized, but I am also acutely attuned to my grandfather's presence. Peaceful. Contented. Confident. Safe. Solidity in body and mind. Rested and restful. My back melds with the chair's firm support, just like my soul melds with my grandpa's unwavering determination to safeguard me, our family.

Honey, according to Cirlot (2001), is also a symbol of "rebirth and a change of personality, consequent upon initiation" (p. 150). In India, it represents the higher self, associated with fire. My grandfather was a fiery person. A powerful, boisterous, booming presence. His loud voice still elicits



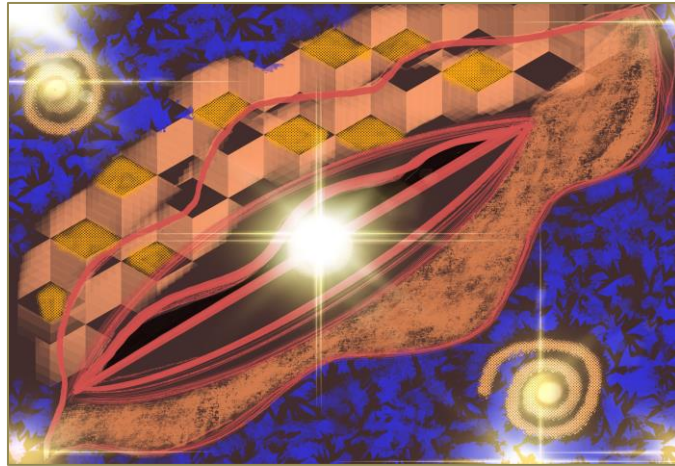
(1967-68). *Delightful Childhood* [Family photograph]. Sofia, walking with grandpa.

my fearful infant response to some unknown scorn, now faded into the pool of unconscious memories. But he is also instrumental for my individuation during my university years. Without his stories, my master's thesis would not have been written. Without his stories, I would not know the difference between honey-tongued wisdom and gilded prattle. Without his stories, I would be lost to dark alleys, shadowy swamps, wells of sadness, earthy smells of underworld roads leading to Elysian fields of asphodels. Without his stories, my stor(e)ying is an incomplete, fragmented, unraveled tapestry, unbraided tongueless history.

My grandpa: the virtuoso ocarina player, the deep baritone-voiced singer, the full-hearted, fierce dancer. A sage. An imago transcending geographical distances, a thick subterranean root of my family tree. No longer my Saboteur, his voice is often the warning awareness when I am

resolving a difficult or a particularly morally murky situation. But most importantly, his voice is a reminder that I can stand my ground. I am able to fend off enemies, to be a brave bee-warrior and sting those who want to harm me. Again, my grandfather's wise words ring clear in my ears: “на вълка вратът му е дебел защото си гледа работата сам.” To rely on myself, to be resolute, to speak my truth.

A honey-tongued storyteller, my grandpa.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, April 7). *Annoyed – My Grandfather's Safeguarding* [Digital art].

His large, calloused yet tender hand clasping my small palm firmly but gently. We are walking together. Toward light. Toward healing. Held, belonging, welcomed, contained, settled, light, connected to my inner happy child, curious, and open. The inner critic is quiet, waiting for my little one to smile, her eyes radiating with joy. They work together, mostly. Counterbalancing forces that harmonize in my adult body, a signal of fullness and groundedness, of homecoming.¹

~

Bees usually fly into our house to die. I wonder what their thoughts are before they succumb to the dark cycle of Life. Where do their energies and medicines go? Are they now transferred to the people who inhabit the house? What are these powers in me? I hear my grandfather whispering something in my ear. I am transmuted into a bee, so I can hear him speak in hushed tones, the

¹ The unbidden image *Annoyed—My Grandfather's Safeguarding* came to me during a session with my therapist and represents the blackish-brownish knot and a feeling arising from somewhere deep inside me on a day when I felt extremely annoyed. Dialoguing with the image, the fear of my grandfather crystalized, later to transform into a feeling of safety and gratitude for his protection when my therapist and I further tapped into the constellated affect.

buzzing of blood and his song in my veins. Ancestral wisdom miraculously purging the fear of rejection and the rawness of abandonment, turning these into the honey of love.

Researching the symbolism of bees is a monumental task, for they are such a fecund archetypal image. From admiration to fear, they carry the burden of human strive for balance, moving in an elaborate but purposeful and focused dance in pursuit of nectar that becomes honey. What is my waggle dance? Its eight-shaped or circular lines coming together into a continuous experience of transition and transmutation: the paths from resources to hive and back, five to fifteen times a day, shifting from left to right to left to right to left to right, drawing across the air and sky tiny symbols of eternity. Like a bee, the inner work I am doing is a constant back and forth: from wound-flower to inner resources, my mother's lineage and my father's, I waggle dance in order to collect the pollen and nectar each wound-bloom offers and turn them into the honey of self-realization and wholeness.

The next wound-flower I visit pricks. In fact, the memory is painful, sharp, shattering. The first time I felt rejected. But, I do have the power to rescript the story (van der Kolk, 2015, p. 630).

Expressive Landmark 10: The Honey of Rejection

A bee sting hurts. The skin swells where the puncture is, wrapping around the stinger the bee leaves behind as a reminder of her sacrifice. I feel the burning poison enter my heart. The sting is deep, penetrating its striated muscle walls. I cannot say if the rupture and its gossamer fissures in my core can heal because I am young and defenseless against the venom of rejection and heartbreak.

I am seventeen, only a year away from my high school graduation. The first pangs of attraction are making me giddy, for the crush I have on this boy is my initiation into the art of loss. I am losing my mind. I am flying high, wagging in zigzag patterns of closeness and withdrawal, gathering knowledge of stars because I want to impress him. I read thick books on astronomy, gazing at the night sky with a naked eye, seeking to identify constellations whose names I quickly forget. Maybe it is a sign, for bees love the light, not the night. But, I am clueless.

We walk together to the bus stop after school, five times a week, but then we split, going our ways in two opposite directions. If I were older and more experienced in the matters of the heart, maybe the signs of disconnection would have been clearer. But, I am young. I am falling in love for the first time. I listen to my heart's song, innocent and hopeful. I admire this boy's intellect, his vast knowledge, the way his deep green-blue eyes drown me. I am a bee caught at the edge of an ocean.

Yet, the music of my heart hums so sweetly, I nearly cry. I dream of intimacy. I dream of sharing a soul. I dream of eternity. I am a dancing bee, wagging daily my way from hive to flowers and back to hive. My heart—tender, unfurled, fully exposed, a wilful offering to the wind of attachment. But, the wind is a trickster, elusive and guileful.

One day, the boy tells me his parents named him after the famous physicist Nikola Tesla, the inventor of alternating electrical current, another sign I neglect. His parents, he tells me, are chemists, but he wants to be a physicist because the stars are his love. Maybe he will be an astronaut one day. Maybe he will discover the secrets of time travel. Or how to cross the event horizon to see what is beyond the black hole's tunnel. We dream together, imagining a future painted in rosy colours and flowers of great beauty, their soft petals holding the secrets of love, of closeness and trust. Our friendship blossoms.

The idyll of our accord lasts approximately six months during which I stow away my secret, waiting for the magic of attachment to happen gradually rather than swiftly. During this time, I often listen with an open heart, dreaming of honeymaking. I am a bee, dancing around the pollen, sending pheromone signals to his boyish center that holds, like a spider, the invisible threads of my love for him. But then ... I discover he is in love with someone else. Her name is Зорница, the morning star, name originally given to the planet Venus, which is the last celestial body to disappear from the night sky before sunrise. The coldness between us seeps imperceptibly. It is not the age of instant text messaging, and I am slow to notice the missed walks together, the silences in our conversations, the misunderstood intentions. Some words, too, sneak in, their stinging buzz still resounding in my ears. Yet, there is honesty in the hurt he causes, unintentionally it seems. I am simply not the one for him.

Seeking validation in others' eyes is not the way to heal old wounds that earlier experiences of rejection have opened. Decades later, the memory still stings, tiny shards of glass lodged in the hairline holes of my heart. Even as an adult, the venom of my first heartbreak taints my relationships with others.

But, with experience also comes knowledge. The passion for learning, the insatiable curiosity my first love adventure fuelled, has gifted me a profound insight. Rejection is also a medicine. If the reason for rejection is our desire for perfection, to show others that we belong, we are worthy, we deserve their love, affection, and acceptance, then, its sting shocks us awake to an unconscious need that feeds our yearning for their approval. The stinger of a bee holds the poison, but it is also her protection. The disproportionate desire for validation, to be heard and seen, to be applauded for

what a person has achieved unveils the darker side of distrusting one's own value. And so, the bee holds the secret to healing the wounds of rejection. Her sacrifice: the loss of innocence and learning to speak the language of suffering. Her sacrifice: the knowledge of death, the letting go of false beliefs and values.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, May 13). *Rejected* [Digital art].

Many North American Indigenous people, according to Robert Thom-Lake (1997), recognize the connection between bees and love (p. 201). As a totem animal, the bee expresses the greatest wish for all living beings to co-exist in peaceful interconnections (King). The more I seek outside approval, the more I fall into the trap of my failure to see there is sweetness in the heart's tiny fissures, waiting to be filled with nectar, alchemically transformed into honey the colour of amber. Another fact, surprisingly, makes the image of the bee the emotional remoulding pivot in this story of unrequited first love. The bee's body is aerodynamically flawed (Svitil). A bee technically should not be able to fly. But, she does. Despite the wind, despite the cold, despite the peril of extinction. The bee adapts. Today, the bee speaks the language of love, of mindful service to myself and others. It is the antidote to rejection. It is the honey of connection that makes every failure sweet and every heartbreak an ingredient from which the Life's syrup is made.

~

Unravelled, the backstory of my Disciplinarian is now shifting. The protection of my grandpa internalized, he becomes a spiritual guide whose advice reminds me that I have the resources I need to continue making honey from the pollen and nectar of the wound-flowers I would keep unearthing from the unconscious fields of my bodily memory. In “[the] promise of unexpected dialogues” (Donohue & Stuart, 2010, p. 2), the “befriending” (van der Kolk, 2015, p. 276; p. 278) of dark emotions maybe challenging but not impossible: loss, grief, and sorrows magically turn into the most powerful Life force—Love.

The fear of my grandpa relinquished, I feel his love wrapped around me and guiding me to a renewed understanding of my original psychic injury. His bees hum a new song, warning me to “not plug any relationship in the old socket of my old wounding” (Paris, 2011, p. 108). No more waste of my psychic energy (Paris, 2011, p. 109), the alchemy of honey making at my fingertips.

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6 | WOLF PATH

Expressive Landmark 11: May 7, 2023

I wake up with a nosebleed, supposedly “a need for recognition. Feeling unrecognized and unnoticed. Crying for love” (Hay, 2004, p. 189), and a spontaneous image: a wolf walking through the back yard fence because one of the wooden panels had fallen and made an opening. I am half-awake, the image—vividly real. It is not a dream. The wolf is a manifestation as tangible as my sense of sauntering around the house, familiar objects surrounding me. I see Him standing on the boundary between our house and the house below us. Initially, it seems the animal is walking away but then the image changes to a stand still, the wolf—the same one that appeared in my dream on May 20, 2016—turns His head in my direction, locking eyes with me. He stands on the threshold between the two lawns, watching. Slight flutter in my chest around the heart and a light squeeze with delicate but perceptible pressure I recognize as uneasiness mixed with fear. I don’t have the feeling the wolf is here to harm me, but I am not sure if His presence is protective either. A desire to watch Him from behind the kitchen window, without approaching, is a sign of my ambivalence. His icy-blue eyes fix my gaze, yet I am also aware of his silver-brown fur, just like the drawing I did when the ancestral spirit first dream-visited me. It was a warning back then, for my son was fighting swollen salivary glands, which resulted in a diagnosis of a chronic autoimmune condition. A few years later, he developed an inflammation, which led to surgery but also to other complications. The wolf back then attacked my son—three or four-year-old in the dream—going for his throat.

Showing up the day after my grandpa’s birthday, the wolf I sense is a manifestation of my grandfather’s life force that an overlooked and unheeded part of my self embodies. So, yes, the ancestral spirit channelling my maternal grandfather’s energies is a protector because He communicated danger unknown to me in the past. I relax a bit, but the need to paint the wolf is urgent and strong.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, May 7). *Ancestral Spirit* [Pencil crayons and oil pastels].

Later that day, I talk to my mom. She tells me a story, which I recount below. This story is an important piece of my ancestral history, filling in a gap in the knowledge of energetic legacy I now trace to roots that probably go further back in time than my own origin. Whether it is inherited trauma or aspects of personality that have been dormant in my adult self, I cannot decide, but the experience is so odd, I take its veracity on faith. There is no way to know with certitude, but I have to trust that the ancestral field holds this knowledge and discloses it to me when the time is ripe.

My mom's story leads to recognizing a synchronicity in the wolf's appearance I have to respect: my grandfather's birthday is on May 6, 1920. He is born on a Sunday. The wolf shows up in my semi-conscious, barely awakened state on May 7, also a Sunday, one hundred and three years later. Of course, the story my mother has shared also unveils a complicated birth legacy: because he was born on Sunday, my grandfather was not officially registered as being born until the next day—May 7, 1920. A link within the family constellation certainly worth noting, for there is meaning behind the synchronicity that the wolf's energy and symbolism might illuminate. And so, in honour of my grandfather, I am writing down the story and the sense it makes to me. Today is about reconnecting with my maternal grandfather's presence by learning about the wolf's medicines and teachings, remembering and respecting His gifts to me. Today is about truth in my familial history I could glean through the conscious amplification of the animal's spiritual powers and mythical qualities.

The discovery that I have started on a journey of recovering or rekindling connections to a familial psychological inheritance, which two generations have lost because of deliberate severing of bonds with the animal guardian or His neglect, is the main point of this landmark. Do I believe the

ancestral spirit is real, I am not sure, but I cannot deny this morning's experience. And so, I paint and I write.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2016, May). *Wolf Guardian Spirit* [Oil pastels].

“A healthy woman is much like a wolf: robust, chock-full, strong life force, life-giving, territorially aware, inventive, loyal, roving” (Estés, 1997, p. 17). The resonant vibes of Estés’ words amplify the need to be strong again, to give back to Life by helping others discover their personal strengths, to continue to explore and express my creativity, to fortify my bonds with family and friends, to follow the pathways of emotional, spiritual, and intellectual evolution I am meant to roam, in this life but with awareness of what previous histories—ancestral and now mine—have also laid down.

Step one: dialoguing with the wolf.

May 16, 2023

Wolves have a keen sense of smell: their strong INTUITION is a source of their strength. How to make this quality mine might be the goal of my wolf-healing journey, the landmark showcasing the relationship I am re-building with the wolf-wild woman in me.

What are your medicines?—power, strength, honesty, loyalty, care, attention to the needs of the family, protection, balance, mating for life

How long have you been with me?—since birth, in the forest before that, the place of your grandfather’s roots, which you have never visited. Your grandfather is the wolf, a lone wolf since his adolescent years, a powerful force in the lives of everyone he had touched, but the energy is frustrated. You know the reason—the She-dog he killed. His most loyal companion who followed him wherever he went. She started howling like a wolf, and the old superstitions: “a dog that howls like a wolf foretells the death of their master,” took precedence, leading to her death. Your grandfather shot Her, point blank, with a gun he had recently purchased. The rest of the story is buried in the past, but you can feel the grief, the pain, the hurt he experienced. He severed the connection to the spirit-guide himself. Then, I showed up again, but you tried to expel me when you gave away the German Shepherd puppy to your mother’s colleague, the hospital guard. Your son was still a toddler. This is when your child and I first met. Baby Richard and baby Mimo. We could have been playmates, but your husband and you were not ready to be my parents. And ... I had to go.

Why are you with me?—to recover the connection, you are (I am) a conduit and a way for the energy to come back into the family, also present in your son—yes, I have shown him my face in a

dream: his first memory, as he shared with you a few days ago. Reconfiguring unity—the family can come together, but you have to find the way to heal it, your own disloyalty requires remedying, a ritual of purification to cleanse the anger and hurt of betrayal, the resentment still festering in your heart. The betrayal is of your own self: not recognizing the needs you have, not honouring your own uniqueness and beauty, the numinous core of your being. Outer betrayal mirrors inner betrayal, so loyalty is required not simply to your family, but to yourself, to your own becoming.

The purpose of being on this Earth is to fully bloom into your unique self that is true to the oneness of your source, not personal as who your parents or forbearers are, but to the divine universal forces that make up all creation. You betrayed that seven lives ago. Forgiveness to self for not becoming who you are meant to be because you are side-tracked, side-stepped, side-slipped, side-lined is the medicine.

On the wolf-path, you are learning patience, waiting for the opportune moment to ‘feed’—to attack the prey.

Who or what is the prey? —I cannot say because you have not developed the inner vision sufficiently, your intuition is on the right track but still weak.

May 28, 2023 – Dialogue with Wolf (continued)

The prey is the distractor, all which diverts you from the purpose of your psychological maturity and spiritual ascension, the changes you must undergo, the metaphorical death and rebirth. Sorting out what is needed, wanted, truly desired in the depth of your heart and inner core is the task. The prey is the weak *yang* energy that does not know your name, which cannot see what your soul contains, the gifts and the talents to share with others but not without serving your own individuation first. Enhancing this insight, just a few days ago, the weak *yang* energy manifests as your husband’s fear of knowing the depths of your emotional, embodied being, mostly relating to the intellectual mind-gifts you share with him, the intellectual bond making the single strand of your relationship. Your betrayal is the over-focus on the cerebral rather than the flesh-feeling aspects of your being, not maturing psychologically, or rather, only now beginning to tap into your sensitivity and body awareness as you enter the second half of your life. An intellectual connection is a limited plane of attachment to being and to others. It is a skewed relationship. You need to balance. The see saw pattern of holding thinking and feelings in tension but of equal value when making decisions. You have tasted its fruits.

The prey is the forgetting, misremembering, and interruptions to the journey because of the diversions and seductive offerings to make choices and act in ways that are not truly your own. The prey is the misconception of what individuation is, the confusion of selfishness with flourishing as a complete, whole, independent, wild woman.

What medicines do you bring to my life?—love, protection, self-assurance, the power to stand your ground, to defend your territory / boundaries, unnecessary fears and caution to not sway you—proceed with intuition but don’t give anger the power to rule you because your anger is fiery! —short temper—watch for it. Remember that a medicine can also be venom.

The wolf is a wise guide and listening to Him bolsters knowledge already building inside as I examine further my identity as a wife and a mother. At this juncture, the day of my physical birth, coming to this life fifty-seven years ago, more of my grandfather’s story comes alive.

May 26, 2023

My grandfather’s lone wolf status seems to be seeping into my own life today: on my birthday, I am alone, but not lonely because the inner strength is noticeable, for I am asking myself: What am I reaching for? What am I going to take a risk for? These two questions resonate with me as I read the chapter on Vasilisa the Beautiful (sharing the name!) in Estés’ book *Women who run with the wolves: Myths and stories of the wild woman archetype*. Both questions arise once the “too-good mother” dies. The too-good mother in me is the people-pleaser, the kind and polite, good mannered and amiable daughter, sister, wife, mother, teacher, and friend. But another image I drew, of a European viper coiled amidst a flaming hoop, is a reminder that there are other ‘figures’ or energies in me, waiting awakening. The lone wolf, according to the Wikipedia page, symbolizes independence, strength and freedom. In Indo-European folklore, the wolf is associated with the warrior class, and all these qualities point back to my grandfather’s words, his motto: “на вълка врата му е дебел защото си върши работата сам.” I am not sure why I need to sense this energy in me today; still, amplifying the wolf archetype as a spiritual guide continues to feel right. A metaphorical representation of fiercelessness... well, this is not a new insight, yet it is an unexplored side of me that is coming into focus. The more I read Estés’s book, the more I find parallels with my own journey of self-discovery. Recently, I have been talking with students about the ‘heroine’s journey’ but perhaps a more appropriate name would be ‘the quest for the wild woman inside.’

The wild woman archetype Estés describes is innate to every man, woman, or child. It is our “natural instinctive psyche” (1997, p. 3), which gradually is pushed underground to reside in the subterranean landscapes of our minds. The illusion of rationality so robust, the distrust of intuition has become a pervasive feature of our modern society and culture. Women the archetype teaches how not to be ‘nice’ when soul-matters are at stake (Estés, 1997, p. 110), and so, the inner wild woman is protective of the intuitive knowledge human beings possess about the boundaries of their true being and deep conscience. The wild woman in me is possibly a spiritual ‘huntress,’ a wisdom seeker, and a healer. But, she is still dormant, showing only inklings of her face.

Step two: disclosure of mythical and archetypal meanings.

May 28, 2023

The stages of healing parallel the stages of the initiatory journey I am on. Reclaiming the “wild Vessela” comes through the testing of “Vessela-Vasilisa.” Discovering the wild one inside is certainly not an easy or quick task. It requires a lot of courage, discipline, and patience. But the most important step in travelling through the inner wilderness and reaching the house of Baba Yaga is the sorting out of the medicines that are already in my body. For that, I have to relinquish my head, my intellect, and let the instinctual, intuitive wisdom of the dark and light feminine guide me to ancestral knowledge, passed through the imprints of my mom’s matrilineal and patrilineal psychic legacy. My great-grandmother’s medicinal energies await awakening and further nourishment, as I learn to heal myself, and potentially others. My grandfather’s fiery spirit, my mother has inherited but also killed in her. The she-wolf she had been but is no longer; however, the She-wolf is not dead.

Estés writes that sorting out our “psychic healing agents” and constantly feeding our psyche with medicines that “wring the truth, the essence, out of these elements” (1997, p. 155) is the task to complete before the fire of our own unfolding burns bright again in the house of our body-minds. I have been sorting out my medicines lately. The gargantuan undertaking is scary, for I cannot have certainty in the rational understanding the intellect grants, but trusting myself to know beyond the logical clarity is necessary if I am to give birth to my psyche’s new vessel. Who is this new Vessela? I don’t know yet, but the glimpses are delicious. Some aspects are already familiar to me. Some are to be discovered. I have to be patient and continue to nurture what sprouts, fertilized through the deep roots I am growing to siphon energies from the fiery core of the Earth, from the fiery core of my

matrilineal predecessors, from the fiery core of the Self. “Both the life-giving and death-dealing natures are waiting to be befriended, forever loved” (Estés, 1997, p. 156).

But, there is a warning: knowing too much, too soon. There are rhythms I have to live and respect: Estés identifies “the rhythms of solitude, of play, of rest, of sexuality and the hunt” (1997, p. 161). I think one of them is lost: sexuality. Perhaps, it is about the lost intimate relationship with my own body that I want to restore. In some ways, it is true that I don’t even know what sexuality is because, in my mind, it is related to sex, but I doubt the concept is just about that. So, there is more to unearth. The body I drew is naked and full of grids. Legless and headless, it is incomplete. A disembodied Vessela. Blue splotches of paint, solid and stark. Pale blue drips, flowing and light. Is it the melting of unhealthy attitudes and beliefs? As Estés advises: “one need not push it, the knowledge will come” (1997, p. 161).

Yet, there are questions I could start asking before making a choice:

1. What am I hungry for?
2. What do I long for?
3. What do I wish for now?
4. What do I crave?
5. What do I desire?
6. What do I yearn for? (Estés, 1997, p. 172).

December 5, 2023

Step three: the wolf-path—cosmological reveries.

The Sirius star came to my attention last night as I was listening to a YouTube video about spiritual bypassing. Actually, the connection is synchronistic because a friend of mine, a fearless advocate of animal rights, directed me to the channel of a certain healer when we went for coffee on the weekend. This particular friendship has withstood significant turbulences in both my friend’s and my life, the cord—thick and shiny. I feel a resonance with her that I don’t have with many of my other friends, a spiritual energy that is elusive yet palpable, frightening yet inviting, for we often discuss topics I would not talk about with anyone else for fear of rejection and misunderstanding, for fear of being judged as crazy. But, let me get to the point of today’s ruminations: living from smallness.

One of the jobs an inner saboteur performs is to deter a person from living unfurled potentialities. Brianna Wiest (2020) defines self-sabotage as having two conflicting desires: a conscious and an unconscious one (p. 28). In a previous landmark, I identified myself as a recovering perfectionist, and in retrospect, I see how I have self-sabotaged my own psychological growth by giving in to the need for external validation, the need to be loved because unconsciously I have associated love with loss and abandonment (Wiest, 2020, p. 30). The source of the sabotaging behaviours is the abandonment I have felt since I was an infant, which is unpacked in another soul-song featuring a letter to my sixteen-month-old self. This reflection is about the wisdom that comes from the stars, particularly, the Sirius star, which is the brightest shining celestial object on the Earth's skyscape, located in the constellation Canis Major. It is a double star, consisting of a white dwarf called Sirius B and a bright blue-white big star, Sirius A, with luminosity 24.5 times more intense than the Sun's (Britannica). The name Sirius comes from Greek and means "sparkling" or "scorching" (Britannica).

The Sirius star was important to the ancient Egyptians who named it Sothis. Believed to have caused the annual flooding of the Nile delta that marked the first heliac rising of the year (Britannica), it influenced the Egyptian calendar significantly. Sirius the ancient Egyptians worshipped because they believed it was the representation of the goddess Isis, daughter of Ra, and a sister / wife to Osiris (Brosch, 2008, p. 12). Sirius, as the manifestation of Isis, is also perceived as related to the Great Mother-Creatrix, which brought order to the world and started the new cycle of growth and development, the "queen and mistress of awe" (as cited in Brosch, p. 13). According to Brosch (2008), in the Northern hemisphere, the star has been associated with a dog, a wolf, or a jackal (p. 7).

The connections between Sirius and the canine family are ancient and well-established. For example, Assyrians called the star "the Dog of the Sun" while the Akkadians named it "Dog star of the Sun" (Brosch, 2008, p. 19). Another association is important to my exploration: Sirius and water, for it is the renewal and cleansing energy of water that allows rejuvenation and rebirth, at least on Earth. The way of water is a healing pathway I follow in another expressive landmark, but it is significant to mention that Sirius is allied with medicine and the origin of honey, its sweetness and the power to restore human beings to life (Brosch, 2008, p. 24-25). More to the point, Sirius is a star that even during the medieval ages was linked with wellness and disease. For example, its rising was an auspicious sign to gather medicines. Sirius ruled, in the beliefs of many medieval astrologists and alchemical physicians, the following herbal plants: savine, mugwort, dragonwort, and the tongue of

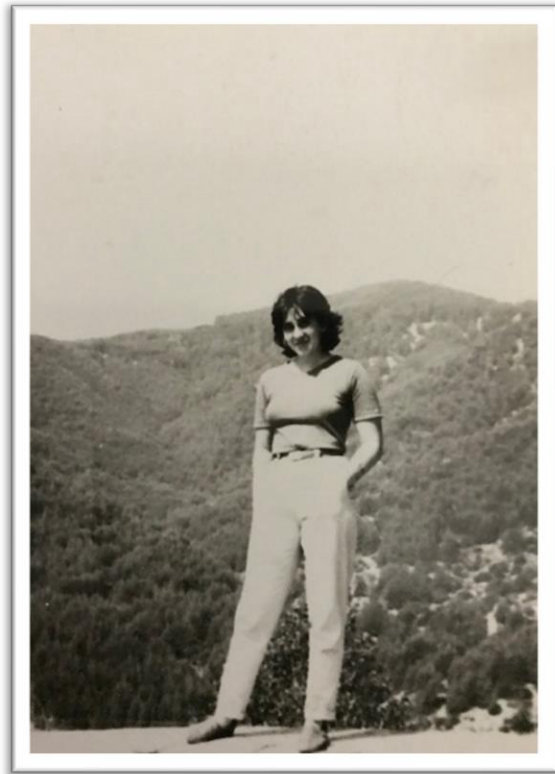
the snake (Brosch, 2008, p. 26), confirming another symbolic chain unbidden unconscious images have forged on my healing trips so far: wolf, bees, snake, and water.

In my personal re\mythifying story, the connection of Sirius, dog / wolf and Artemis, now becomes clear. I have felt the powers of Artemis stir, as I was looking at a photograph of myself in my twenties. I wrote about the reawakened energy when I explored Doris Lessing's revision of the Acteon myth in her short story "A Sunrise on the Veld" (Balinska-Ourdeva, 2021). If Brosch's research is veritable, in ancient Greece, Sirius was believed to be one of Acteon's hounds, or one of Artemis' dogs (2008, p. 26).

So, following the wolf-path brings me to two healing crossroads: a strong desire to be independent, which I have forsaken because of the fear of rejection and a fusion with my dad, whose thwarted *yang* energy has set the perspective from which I have perceived my capabilities and talents: living small. Fear of success and the desire to be loved (Wiest, 2020, p. 30) unconsciously have informed many of my choices while consciously I have pursued intellectual enlargement at the expense of my physical, emotional, and spiritual health. So, my obedient and people-pleaser personality is my smallness, not my inner child, but what she has been shaped into under the critical gaze of the Saboteur, the part of me I identified as the

Disciplinarian, a familial pattern allowing me "to avoid scrutiny" (Wiest, 2020, p. 31) by taking a backseat position, following others rather than my being. My perfectionism has been a defense mechanism, protecting me from the fear of rejection and failure. Reclaiming my autonomy because I have discovered and gathered the medicines in me is highlighted through the symbolism of the Dog Star, and the wolf-path is the direction I choose now to follow.

To add some of the ethnic Bulgarian connotations associated with Sirius. The cult of the wolf is a part of the pre-Bulgarian belief system, remnants of which have survived throughout the



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (1986). *Dialectology Linguistic Research Fieldtrip*. Madan, Rodopi Mountain, Bulgaria [Photograph].

centuries. Bulgarian historians have traced the semantic connections between wolf / dog and Sirius in pre-Bulgarian words designating authority figures such as the title *khan* (“ruler,” etymologically related to the constellation Canis Major and the Sirius star) (Marknatan). In November and February, the folk calendar celebrates The Wolf Holidays (Вълчи дни). The wolf in the ancient Bulgarian traditions was a symbol of the superior warrior, embodying physical strength, endurance, independence, and power. An interesting detail is the use of a wolf’s fur, his jaws, skull or skin in healing rituals pre-Bulgarian shamans performed (Bibliotheca magicka). Whether these are true facts or speculations is not so important, for the synchronistic events I have experienced and the unsolicited images the unconscious evinced are real. The meaning I make of these images charts a trajectory of transformation which asks for unrecognized aspect of myself to be brought to light.

The objective is clear: trusting myself and my intuitive knowledge, “[seeking] my own goals on a terrain of *my own choosing*” (Bolen, 2014, p. 135; my emphasis). With awareness of my own vulnerability, I am no longer a lonely She-wolf (like my mom or my grandpa), nor am I goal-oriented to the point of not cherishing my personal needs and desires, or my connections. Coming out of my shell yet being patient enough to wait for the opportune moment to start on a new “hunt” for inner treasures, uncovering and fostering talents and gifts that will allow me to strengthen my autonomy. Empowering my inner leader (*khan* or the wild wolf-woman), I can restore the fire of my passions and my true voice, embodying the authority of my deep conscience and being. If that means decoupling from my father and mother, uprooting those beliefs formed through family / patriarchal indoctrination that I don’t need to believe are true anymore, giving priority to body rather than head, so be it: I welcome my grandfather’s and my great-grandmother’s energies, the Sirius star illuminating my way forward, the wolf-footprints marking the new trail through the inner wilderness I must walk. Bolen’s words encapsulate the purpose of my crone-years: “knowing [my] shadow” (2014, p. 140), so what lurks beneath does not possess or control me. Learning more about myself is also learning more about others, and pursuing helping others to discover their numinous core might as well be the direction my Life will possibly take.

The wolf-path criss-crosses all four aspects of my existence: physical—I need the inner strength of my warrior-queen to ward off the attack of cells gone rogue (recently discovered blood and lung malaises); emotional—I need to foster and cultivate my intuition to rebalance and recalibrate the overemphasis on reason and intellect; mental—I need to direct my conscious efforts to spreading the knowledge I have acquired and inspiring others to discover themselves; and, finally

spiritual—I must persist in evolving my awareness of the Great Mystery and the spiritual centre of my being. In short, I must continue on the healing path leading to wholeness and inner harmony.

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7 | SABOTEUR GUISES

Expressive Landmark 12: Zabzz – November 19, 2023

We are housed in a dying, deteriorating body, yet we are filled
with immortal longings. We are born of spirit and flesh, and it
is up to our creative imaginations to unite them.
(Kalsched, 2021, p. 453)

The Saboteur is a splinter psyche that has formed because I felt betrayed or betrayed myself in a situation of extreme emotional intensity that my mind could not process properly. He, for I don't have the feeling of a *jin* energy being my Saboteur, has taken many guises, some of which I mentioned previously: the King; the faceless man in the basement; the Disciplinarian, whose presence transformed into a guardian spirit hosting my grandpa's life-energy; appearances of my biological dad in dreams, the most recent one dating from November 24, 2022; and many other male dream-figures who have attempted in some ways to harm or to help me. The Saboteur is a protector, but one that cuts me off from my resources, so I cannot connect to what roots me, cannot trust myself and others, or feel safe. The Saboteur tells me there is a threat, and I respond accordingly. I imprison myself in what is familiar: doubt, distrust, inability to act from a place of power and light. Fear gets in the driver's seat, and I mobilize habitual defensive energies, regardless of how out-dated or self-destructive these are.

Of course, dream-figures signal internal energetic movements, and because all these characters are actually parts of me, they come with messages, pleasant or not, I need to heed. On this soul-song track, the energy I follow is my father's. Physically, it is directly related to the sciatica pain and my recovery from it: a slow and erratic process, ongoing still. My investigations have also linked my CML diagnosis to a paternal traumatic inheritance, but the family history is hazy and piecemeal.

So, to unravel the backstory of Zabzz, the wounded *yang* energy I have received from my father, I will use a technique from Mark Wolynn's book *It did not start with you: How inherited trauma shapes who we are and how to end the cycle* (2016) and a family constellations' exploration as a witness to someone else's family dynamics at a workshop with Sharon Zaychuk back in 2017. Wolynn's method consists of describing my father (2016, p. 102/241) in order to trace a core sentence, capturing my unconscious attitude to Life and revealing an inherited trauma. The description, dated May 8, 2016, reads: *My father is hardworking, busy, absent, patient, quiet, tired, skilful with his hands, constantly fixing things, emotionally reserved, keeping to himself, has not been involved in my upbringing though there is a picture*

of me walking with him in the neighbourhood park, the same one where my mom used to take me to play and gather flowers. Then, again on March 11, 2017: My dad is distant, hard working, absent, quiet, not knowing him—no contact—strict. The core sentence baring unconscious beliefs about Life and my ability to handle challenges: My worst fear is my incapacity to cope, inability to do things myself, being unable to find a way out. The worst part of not being able to cope is the feeling of pain, powerlessness, and abandonment. I fear that I will be alone, an all consuming, profound loneliness.

The emotion I feel now, as I read aloud what I have written, is sorrow. Previously, it might have been resentment, which is the reason for my rejection and distancing from my father. But, lately I don't hold it against him, especially after the time we spent together in the summer of 2023.

Wolynn clarifies the significance of the feelings we harbour towards our parents: “the emotions, traits, and behaviours we reject in our parents will likely live on in us” (2016, p. 68/241). My unconscious way of loving my father has led to a fusion with him, of which I was unaware until the sciatica injury, for his convalescence from a surgery after a fall paralleled my recovery from the damaged nerve. The coincidences were uncanny, but in retrospect, my experience confirms Wolynn's words: “when we merge with a parent, we unconsciously share an aspect, often a negative aspect, of that parent's life experience” (2016, p. 84/241). A clear explanation for the existence of the split part I call Zabzz. He was born from my dad's personal trauma, and then my feeling of being betrayed because tatko did not offer the emotional support and closeness I needed him to provide. Wolynn clarifies further my realization: “Children manifest what is behind the parents (pointing to the grandparents) but also what is unresolved between the parents” (personal communication, March 12, 2017).

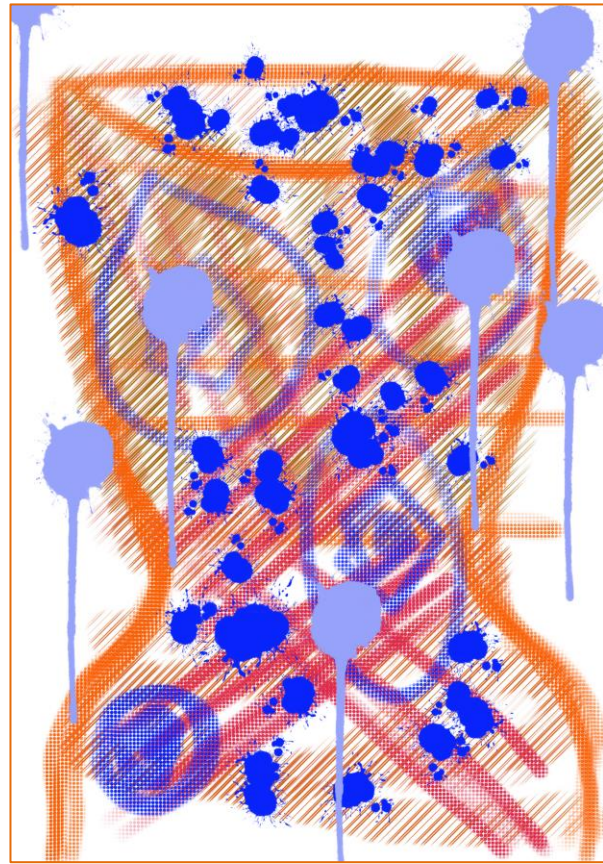
Hollis defines betrayal as a form of loss (1996, p. 47). At a moment when the nervous system is highly activated because of an overwhelming fear, a belief that those who could help did not generates a feeling of profound helplessness and hopelessness while distrust, loss of innocence, and loss of connection to those from whom we expected protection, seep in. A child imagines her parents to be there any time she needs them. She wants to feel safe, loved, mirrored, and validated. But, parents cannot, or are unwilling to constantly provide such reassurance, and over time, the child begins to distrust. My father did not express his love through hugs or emotional encouragement. In fact, all of the above descriptors, in Jungian terms, point to a “negative father complex” (Marchiano, 2017), the absent father, and consequently, the “good father messages,” such as “I have confidence in you. I am sure you can do it;” “You are special to me. I am proud of you;” or “You are beautiful” (Rosenberg, Rand & Asay, 1991, p. 215), I needed to receive in order to develop a healthy and

balanced self, my personal father did not overtly supply. And so, I rejected him as a parent, for he was someone on whom I could not depend for safety, confirmation, and care.

I remember he brought me a doll from one of his business trips to Russia. I must have been five or six years old. I did not like playing with dolls, and my mom remembers that I disassembled the toy, separating her head from the body, removing her hands and legs, and leaving her mutilated torso unclothed and fully exposed. What a telling metaphor the image is now for me since I can sense the projected hatred toward a father who I felt had betrayed me. The memory surfaced unexpectedly this year in mid-June, taking shape in the *Disembodied Vessel* doodle drawing I did just a few weeks before my trip to my native country.

Similarly to Selinske (2016), a physical disability and my confrontation with it is currently part of my individuation process, aiding the integration of shadow aspects (p. 31): both beneficial and detrimental, as I face my true being, seeking wholeness and wisdom on my journey to reclaim, revive, and restore the harmony and fullness of my vessel. The healing, however, cannot happen unless I revisit and re-story my relationship with my parents. Again, Wolynn explains: “on a physical level, a rejection of our parents [feels] as a pain, tightness, or numbness in our body” (2016, p. 59/241). It has been a year and a half since my right leg has been numb. The pinched sciatica nerve, subsequent to a large disc protrusion, was diagnosed in 2022, one the day prior to the air flight meant to take me back to Bulgaria to see my parents because my father was not doing well and my mother was at the end of her rope taking care of him. Reconnecting with the love I innately felt for tarko when I was young, I can let go of what I might carry that is actually his (Wolynn, 2016, p. 69/214). The release in the form of forgiveness is welcome and precious.

Yet, it feels necessary to take a step back and explore the body-mind rupture I have lived for over half a century. The *Disembodied Vessel* image represents symbolically what my somatic vessel



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, May 27).
Disembodied Vessel [Digital art].

looked like prior to developing strategies to connect with my feelings and intuition, to notice and witness the movements of inner energies. The image was created on the day after my most recent birthday and rendered sensations and emotions I experienced then, but their relevance today, with the knowledge I have about what my body is going through, is even more tangible. The changes—though not exactly welcome—are immense. Maybe on the day after my birthday, again, the unconscious was speaking, giving me a warning, which I overlooked. Zabzz, it seems, is my body’s voice, volunteering clues about what I have to attend to. “When [I] stop listening to [Zabzz], [my] body and stress [indeed] show in other ways” (Tujague & Ryan, 2023, p. 235).

May 27, 2023: Amplification

As I look at the *Disembodied Vessel* image that came today, tightness in the chest squeezes the breast muscles, which are slightly restricted, and the pressure spreads down to my stomach without reaching it. I started doodling with my non-dominant left hand, intuitively picking the brush stroke: texturized. Colours, too, were chosen unthinkingly. I have been unsettled since yesterday, my birthday, feeling a little on edge. Anticipating something to happen but not knowing what. Then, grid-like parts invited the dominant right hand to take over, switching back to non-dominant hand for the blue dots, circles, and dripping light blue blobs. Shifting *yin* and *yang* energies, surging back and forth, restless, seeking to become one. They represent my scattered Life-force unable to find form and expression.

Blue is sadness, but the shades of blue in the image are not sorrowful. Their presence is solid and affirmative on the vase’s exterior. The whole image feels messy, disoriented, aspiring or reaching for something, but there is no direction for its movement except down and within the vase’s container.

Vases are a maternal symbol because they are about sustenance. A vase is “supposed to be in a ‘spill position’ or overflowing, suggestive of water moving, running, and so nourishing. It represents an immersive world” (Vase). Whether held or big enough to fit a whole person inside, a vase contains and encloses. It can spin. It is smooth and rounded, a vessel of wholeness. A vase with a lid in Chinese Buddhism represents good luck and is also symbolic of “supreme intelligence triumphant over birth and death” (Cirlot, 2001, p. 274). The Egyptian hieroglyphs equate the vase with Nu, “the god of repose, immanence and acceptance” (Cirlot, 2001, p. 359). Returning to the

sustenance of my vessel, I long for unifying the disparate energies, for returning to homeostasis and wellness.

A receptacle, the vase is a body that could be emptied. I have been reading a lot about Vasilisa the Beautiful, and the initiation journey of women venturing on their quest for the wild woman inside. So, the disorganized yet ordered insides of the vase-vessel-Vessela-Vasilisa are representation of the turbulent changes that are happening in my physical body as I am continuing to adapt to its new normal—its cellular unruliness, but also the changes in my emotional, intellectual, and spiritual frame. Perhaps, the vase represents my efforts to contain and find a form or an outlet for the internal energies burgeoning, to channel my Life-force and put it in service to what matters rather than scattering it on small and insignificant pursuits.

The symbolism of the grid is also interesting. Etymologically, the word is shortened from *gridiron*, or *griddle*, a shallow frying pan that in the early 13th century absorbed other words such as the Anglo-French *gridil*, Old North French *gredil*, all inherited from the Old French word *graille* (“grill, grating”), going further back to the Latin noun *craticula* or “small griddle.” The investigation continues: the cooking utensil for broiling over a fire is known since the early 14th century. Since confusion of “l” and “r” was common in the Norman dialect, the end result of these transformations is what we know today as a “grid.” It is also worth mentioning that the grid is related to a medieval instrument of torture by fire (Grid).

Oposing sensations feed my impressions. Despite the constricted chest, this morning I feel fiery inside: a large flaming circle right in the middle of it. Purification by fire, purging of what does not serve me anymore. All images so far point to the dying of parts in me that I have held to and identified with (my personas?), but I no longer need to protect me. They have become toxic, and though I have identified with



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, July). *Facing Reality* [Digital art].

them, they must go so that the new “Vessela” can be born. Thus, the missing hands and legs are indicative of the relinquishing of those personas or masks. How will I regrow my hands and legs?

Returning to the exploration of my wounded *yang* energy, I need to heal from my self-betrayal because of an inherited fear: “I am not good enough,” “I am a burden, unworthy of love.”

In my late teens, when I strongly rejected and distanced from my father, I blamed him for not moving out and asserting his authority, for agreeing to follow the lead of my grandpa rather than forging his own path and building his own “kingdom” (Armstrong, 2003). I blamed tarko for not getting angry when overloaded with family chores, for making my mom unwanted and depressed, for being indecisive, for being unambitious, for his fear of Life, which I seem to have inherited and now am trying to face and transform. Similarly to Selinske’s personal story, my personal myth is about “betrayal and sacrifice of other” (2016, p. 32). It is also about the entanglement with my parents and carrying their traumas prior to awakening into consciousness and recognizing the violent electrical shocks of my inner Saboteur, Zabzz. I felt my dad’s pain this summer when the image titled *Facing Reality* spontaneously came while I was observing him struggle to walk, to remember words, to form meaningful sentences, to be with me in a way that opened my heart to his love, concern, and appreciation of me. We connected through poetry, art, play, daily walks, attentive listening, and my empathy for him.

Let’s hear what Zabzz has to say, releasing what is in the way.

Expressive Landmark 13: Looping to March 22, 2023

What stands in the way of being fully healthy (for the past half a year, and possibly in the future) is my sciatica pain. Though related to aging, it is also the presence of a darker energy that stops me from doing many of the things I used to do, like jogging, going to Zumba, lifting heavy objects, bending all the way down to touch the ground, to name just a few. So, I dialogue with Zabzz, my latest saboteur.

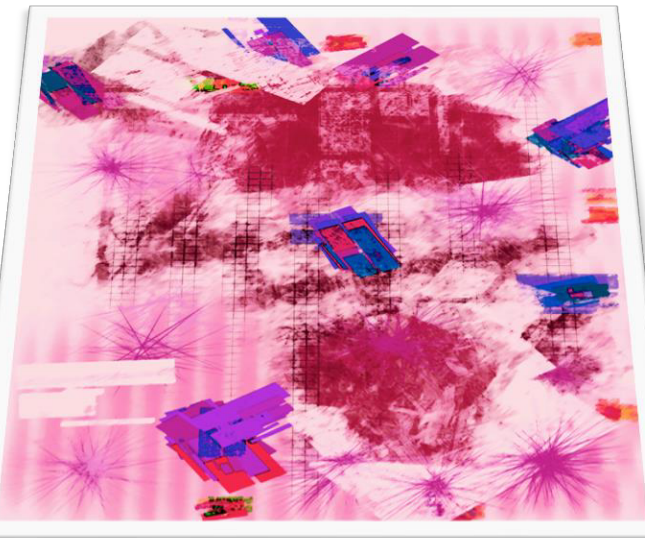
V: I talk to you in hushed tones, occasionally angry and loud, but most of the time, I just bear you, all consuming energy, in silent screams—bursts of laughter—a stream of pulsations, quickening pace as the throbbing intensifies, and the voice is trapped, inside, sliding on a handmade slope, covered with cutgrass. It is not a scream of protest but of acceptance. Today someone talked about “resigned

acceptance;" as I scream silently, I resist, you, Zabyy. Once expressed, you become a wail; the universe owns you. I know why you are here, but I don't always listen. Yesterday, what made you come back?

Z: I constantly return because the heart is not full, the mind is not clear; the memory of too much happiness and comfort thwarts the balance, which you continue to disrupt when you pay no attention to body-speak, when you ignore the calls of the soul, and give precedence to your intellect. Mind over matter. Unwise, seeking wisdom, you have to slo-o-o-o-w do-o-o-own. Stop. Notice. Hold. Dance with me. Let go.

V: You are subdued today because I paid attention.

Z: It helps to listen, but I come and go as I please. You are still learning my language—burning sensation—get up and walk. Tense muscles—lie down. Pulling like strings, stretching in two opposite directions—cold compresses and rest. I dictate the rhythms, you merely follow. I am a cycle, a cadence, in-motion. I am ebb and flow, a makeover, re-birthing. I am a reminder of the preciousness of life. There is no time to waste. Focus on the sublime,



Balinska-Ourdeva. (2023, March 22). Zabyy The Saboteur
[Digital art]

the numinous, the profound, the sacred you are drawn to when we dance.

V: I am going to render you mute—and smiling when you disappear in a pool of rusting red.

Z: What would the new story be? I am curious. I am intrigued. You know I always have the last word, but you don't have to be afraid. I come as a friend, an ally, a guide, the custodian of knowledge you would not acquire otherwise.

Today is a good day, and at this moment, Zabzz's voice is just a murmur.

While rendering him, a surge of spiky energy scatters jittery, jagged, nicked shapes all over the screen canvas; spikes turn into stars, into neurons' zapping axons and dendrites, the sensations of nerves firing with rapid, pin-prick needled pulsations. A desire for red, a desire for asymmetrical forms and lines, spreading randomly in all directions, cluttered and clustered; my solar plexus, tightening, becomes a knot. I am afraid of letting go.

The newly rendered image, as I sit with it, surprisingly brings me hope, a feeling of control, a realization that Zabzz does not define me because I can experience joy, delight, wonder, awe, pleasure, content, serenity, wholeness, even bliss; it is a dance. Zabzz and I dance: two steps forward, one step sideways, but never backwards, never following the same pattern.

What I want to tell Zabzz is this: I have given you a poem, and probably others will visit. Sending you away for a while will be a return to normal, but I am not sure I can have the same profound appreciation for Life if you were not my dance partner.

Learning your language is unbearable, but we are slowly becoming co-creators of a softer, gentler, kinder, more pliable being, a flower moved by wind, blooming amidst the rusted, corrugated metal sheets of your sharp teeth—like a razor-point barbed wire that I can now cut through and let myself temporarily free.

This week, you Zabzz, are going into a shoebox, in the closet where winter jackets and coats hang together with the rest of winter paraphernalia, as I think of packing you away for good, fully aware you will be back, just like the season.

November 19, 2023: Back on the trail

You reared your head, again, my inner Saboteur. Fear, profound and all consuming, ruled my existence over the past few weeks. It is not gone, but the voice has mutated into a peaceful awareness of the inevitable, yet a strong belief that whatever I need in order to heal, I already have. The fear is an old habit the inner Saboteur brings close to consciousness, filling my thoughts with doubts, helplessness, and guilt: a conviction that things could have turned out differently had I made a different choice.

All of these emotions have roots in my father's psychological hurt as I have imbibed his unconscious powerlessness and unrealistic self-image. Suffering from dementia, he is deteriorating rather quickly, turning into a child, completely dependent on my mom's care. But, he and I had a great time together this summer as I visited Bulgaria with the intent to be with my parents yet to decouple from them as well. Dementia, according to Louise Hay, is "a refusal to deal with the world as it is" (2004, p. 164). My personal explanation of my dad's condition is shutting down and walling off because he wants to forget the anguish he carries. An internal pain and guilt because of self-betrayal and giving up on becoming who he was meant to be, living small rather than big. *Zabzz* reminds me of this wounded energy in me. He reminds me of the split I have experienced as my physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual "bodies" (Bernard, 2023) have been severed because of the perceived paternal betrayal. But, as Sharon Zaychuk explained in her workshop on family constellations, "The father and the relationship with him is for a boy the source of stability and what makes the grown-up son stay in a relationship. The father is the support that grounds a male. Without that support, a man can feel shaky, unstable, without resource for strength" (personal communication, March 17, 2017). I don't know what relationship *tarko* and his father had, but in retrospect, it does not seem to have been a close bond. I don't think my father received from his parents the love, validation, and support he needed, likely the source of his deep and fateful psychological injury. Hence, *tarko* could not give what he did not receive.

What I know about my father's family history is really patchy. He left Litakovo, his place of origin and the village where my mom was also born, and joined his older brother in Sofia when he was fourteen. He finished high school and trained as a mechanic. He worked at the repair depot for the Bulgarian National Railway Company, making it to the rank of a master mechanic, responsible for a team of people who were fixing train engines and coaches. What my husband tells me of the social standing my father had in his workplace seems contradictory to what I remember of his presence at home: at work, my father was an authoritative figure, enjoying the attention of all the ladies, whom his fellow mechanics respected, both his subordinates and those who outranked him in the organizational structure. My father liked to go to parties. He enjoyed being among people, but I don't remember him being an outspoken or chatty person. When I look at photographs of him as a young man, he is charming! He is a 'catch'! My mom has shared that he had a strong romantic attachment to a girlfriend, but they separated, and so he probably entered the marriage heartbroken. In photographs, my parents seem to be in love, yet their marital existence turned into mutual suffering, perfidy, anger, and bitterness. I won't go into details here, for I am going to unpack the

family pattern in another soul-song track along my healing journey. But, it is important to add that my rejection of my father has a lot to do with the way he treated my mother, yet the story I have told myself might not be the whole truth. Memories are malleable and unreliable. Memories are coloured by our unconscious attitudes and beliefs the early bonds with our parents have informed. Memories are misleading. Still, as disjointed and random my conversations with dad were this summer, I pieced a story together from the reminiscences he shared with me, and in this story, he emerges a man of formidable strength and ability.

Ignoring my father's strengths, focusing exclusively on his perceived betrayal has impacted both the feeling of well-being in my body and my self-trust, for lacking the "good father messages" did not help me to "go into the world with confidence, to practice what [I think I have learned], and to see the world more clearly" (Rosenberg, Rand, & Asay, 1991, p. 215). But, as I realize now, the truth is far more poignant and complex.



Shuleva, S. (2023, March). *My Father-in-law's 81st Birthday* [Family photograph]. Sofia, Bulgaria.

My dad was a tank driver, and his pride about being an expert in the art of manoeuvring such a monster of military machinery was palpable, for he kept recalling these memories often. On his eighty-first birthday, my sister-in-law took a photograph of him in front of a restaurant called *Танкиста* (the tank crew member), and I see my dad smiling (my mom is stern looking).

Another anecdote my dad shared this summer was about the time he worked in a brick-making factory. It was a gruelling work, but in his remembrance, he seemed content and confident in the competence he developed. It seems manual labour, fixing things, and helping others to repair their gadgets was a source of self-respect and fulfillment for him. But, the dark side of his personality—the submissive *yang* energy that yielded to my grandfather's imposing patriarchal rule in the family, injured both my parents. "A break between parents is a break in the flow of life" (Zaychuk, personal communication, March 17, 2017). How did the break between my parents, which was a guarded family secret, affect me?

In my adolescence, I witnessed the family discord, my parents' mutual resentment and spitefulness. Still a child, I did not understand it. Even as a young woman, I missed the signs of infidelity, remaining an innocent "maiden without hands," which Selinske's article (2016) beautifully interprets. I formed the victim part of my self, playing a huge role in my response to the unfaithfulness in my own marriage, and replaying an inherited pattern that both my brother and I have lived, with two opposite outcomes: I chose to stay with my husband, my brother divorced and remarried.

According to Selinske, an emotionally absent father provokes the daughter to compensate by directing her energy to "intellectual strivings" (2016, p. 32). My obsession with cerebral quests and expansion of knowledge and analytical skills (*logos*) has led to a deformed vessel, head severed from body. Psychologically, the rejection of my father I have experienced as a rejection of my sensuality and sexuality. It is only recently that, when making decisions of personal importance, I started listening to my body-speak before the intellect agreed and mobilized the will to act and achieve a goal. Thus, the internalized energetic message from my wounded father and his frustrated *yang* energy is the belief that I am not good enough and a burden to bear. Lisa Marchiano explains: "[a negative father complex] may make it difficult to trust ourselves as essentially good and competent." It shows up ambivalently as an "exciting" and a "persecuting" part that keeps one hopeful of finding the magical other who can complete a woman while also keeping her "cut off from life" (2017, p. 92). My metaphorical hands and legs I lost as I formed a self-image of lack and deficiency: constantly comparing myself to others and finding I was inadequate. And, of course, developing an inimical relationship with my body, primarily being an object of shame, or simply forgetting that it is a biological reality determining my identity and vitality, simply ignoring it and not giving it the proper care and respect (PRH, 2006, p. 4/4).

When I was in high school, my distorted self-image fully bloomed. My favourite character at the time was Goethe's Doctor Faustus. I admired his insatiable thirst for knowledge, his curiosity, and openness to experience. He wanted wisdom, happiness, and fulfillment but he wanted to acquire these in unorthodox ways: he made a deal with the Devil and gave him his soul. Doctor Faustus was my idol because of his erudition and strong intellectual drive, but as a tenth-grader, I don't think I understood the warning of Goethe's tragic tale. I remember, though, that I identified with Doctor Faustus' dissatisfaction with life to the point of feeling depressed. I wanted to carve a sign and wear it on my chest, saying: "I am stupid," my inner Saboteur having his way with me even at this fragile age. I did not make a sign, but the feeling of being unintelligent fuelled my drive to become highly academic, to pursue learning, knowledge, and all the fruits *logos* could grant me. My body I did not even consider as part of the equation, channelling all my efforts and energies to become smart.

The ways I have been cut off from life is the neglect of my being's physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects. In other words, my sensibility, my body awareness, and my soul-nourishing have been ignored at the expense of developing my intellect. So, confronting this complex head on is not only necessary but also redeeming. Here Marchiano aids in seeing the predictability of such confrontation: "Standing forehead to forehead with these inner personalities leads to their transformation and serves individuation" (2017, p. 92). My exploration of my grandpa's energy confirms the truth of her statement, and now I turn to stand "forehead to forehead" with Zabzz, who keeps zapping me when I don't listen to my body's voice. He reminds me that I am not destined to live in pain, misery, bitterness, and resentment because I have been entrapped in a prison of my own making. He spotlights the victim self. The people pleaser. The personas I have developed by banishing "aggression, [anger], sensuality, selfishness, and other qualities [unacceptable] in the feminine psyche" because of patriarchal familial and cultural upbringing. Reclaiming and integrating these shadow aspects is the only way a woman with a father wound could heal herself (Marchiano, 2017, p. 95), and so, I am slowly re-growing my hands and legs by returning my vessel to wholeness by pursuing the balance of body, mind, and spirit. The intellect now is serving the expansion and growth of my being rather than following its own agendas and projects (*PRH*, 2005, p. 3/3) because the truth is that if I "cannot connect to [my] bodily emotions then [my] sense of self is built on fragile foundations" (Sieff, 2015, p. 126).

After my husband's betrayal because my projections had made him the 'prince charming' to take care of me unconditionally by giving me what I thought I needed most— validation, love, and acceptance—the agony was unbearable. But, the betrayal was also an opportunity for personal

transformation because I learned that if my father's warped *yang* energy was to be strengthened, I needed to learn to take care of myself, to know my needs, to be my own 'parent' and give myself what I did not receive as a child when I felt abandoned, neglected, lonely, or sad. Though I turned bitter initially, a lot of work was necessary to convert the bile, guilt, shame, and anguish into forgiveness. The process is unfinished, for new challenges now stand on the way.

The latest changes in my body, manifesting more signs of aging, speak loud to my victim self who continues to harbour anger, resentment, guilt and shame in her heart. However, the anger is no longer directed at my husband or my dad. Reading Alison Armstrong's book *Keys to the kingdom* (2003) shifted that energy to a place of recognition: my own self-betrayal cracking open the dried muddy crust the old beliefs about men have formed around my wounded heart. I have built a false altar of misconceptions about what I need from a man and how a man responds to these needs, often unarticulated. My inner Saboteur previously instructed such misapprehensions, sticking to the familiar knowledge of past hurt and pain, in which I recognize my mom's hurt and pain. Abandonment, rejections, disconnection, withdrawal, and yes, anger, guilt, shame. The fissure that opened the thick coating and let the water of compassion clear the mud was the sentence: "[women] can lose [them]selves" when they begin to please the men in their lives (or others for that matter!). A "weak sense of [her self]" (Armstrong, 2023, p. 60) is the shadow side of a woman's ability to adapt, one of her greatest strengths and an organic aspect of her fluid femininity. Unable to sort out her priorities, to know what she needs and to ask for it so that a man can provide, she fails to notice, to value, to appreciate, and give the man what he needs: the praise he deserves for being the protector and provider (Armstrong, 2003, p. 77). I have lived this mistake a little too often and for a little too long because that is what my mother had taught me.

Light-struck, I now wonder about the inner Saboteur's advice: it is the voice of my culture, and in my family, the failure of women to understand the men with whom they lived. I cannot speak about my grandmother, for all I saw as a child of her relationship with my grandfather confirms the observations Armstrong's book makes: my grandpa was a King, fully formed, with a strong sense of self, and what the kingdom he ruled was. He was a protector. He was a provider. He had solidity I have never witnessed in my dad. I don't know if my grandpa made my grandma happy. I hope he did. I have never heard her complain. In fact, I remember the two of them lying in bed cocooned in the summerhouse that was built in later years to accommodate my grandpa's need to spend time alone. They were asleep, snuggled in each other's arms. They were relaxed, peaceful, warmly nestled in their intimate embrace. But, the story of my mother is a different one. And, it is her story that I

replayed in my marriage, which will be the subject of discussion in another healing path. The layers of the inner Saboteur peeling off, I continue to unveil his various guises and make friends with him. Curious and receptive. Grateful for every new self-discovery on this healing journey, I am in a liminal space: a locus in my life where “the old self-narrative does not fit any longer, and the new narrative has not yet emerged,” likely to encounter “dangers...where there are no large-enough narratives” to illuminate the movement forward (MacKay, 2008, p 197).

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8 | SEARCHING FOR NEW MEMORIES

Expressive Landmark 14: March 5, 2024

My processes of forgiveness culminate in a collage and a gratitude letter to my dad, starting a new contemplative trail, which this pictorial script charts. Forgiveness is a Christian religious concept I have been struggling with. Intention-wise, it reverberates with Buddhist beliefs, minus the emphasis on repentance as a necessary element for the release of toxic feelings and psychological strife. Forgiveness orients me toward a state of profound and powerful transformation, affecting all pivotal centers constitutive of my being (Long, 2017, p. 101).

At the onset of the soul-track, I revisit the notion of remembrance because the letting go of hurt, blame, desire for revenge, and retribution otherwise has no origin point. The reflection below is on what I am leaving behind, as I move through past hurts perceived as my father's injurious wrongdoings, particularly seeing myself as a victim of his absence and lack of attachment. "Replacing anger with empathy" (Long, 2017, p. 101) and grief with love make up the crux of my body's emotional pivoting when I collaged and wrote the letter to him. And yet, his and my traumas' criss-crossing threads continue to be intrinsically linked—my father's illnesses and my maladies, feeding off each other while our weakened physical vessels persist in sending messages about disturbances at a fundamentally cellular level, hard to fathom, difficult (even impossible, maybe?) to explain in contemporary medical terms: his dementia advancing, my non small cell lung cancer presently adventuring to the pancreas and metastasizing there.

The meditative thread that follows appears once again at the end of the memoir. Here I honour the ripples it generates by opening with a selected passage from an essay I wrote in 2022, after my CML diagnosis, which on March 5, 2024 I revisited again in response to Spector's (2022) grieving deck card titled "What is left behind?"

What I have left behind is certainty, predictability, and comfort. Daily, I am reminded of how lucky I am because I depend on a pill to keep me functioning, a miracle, really, considering what the prognosis is: five years if I don't take it. My body, too, is revved up to the utmost, my immune system constantly on the go because of the checkpoint inhibitor. My lifespan recalculated to eight months without the infusions, possibly five to seven years, if the immunotherapy works, with no other complications. "Nostalgia for the things that did not happen." The phrase is from a Netflix series I watched, called Saving Bea. It struck me hard when I heard it. A large part of my emotional charge presently is the nostalgia for the things that did not happen. And so, I re-shape my oncologist's second report into a poem, added here:

*my body is the judge
deciding on the sentence
the jurors—my illnesses
the crime—neglect*

*i read the court transcript
a doctor's letter spewing
clinical trial numbers
measuring my chances*

*the median progression-free
survival*

the median overall survival

*numbers charting a lifeline
from 8 to 30 months*

*but also a 33% chance of being
alive in 5 years*

*i sit in the place of the accused
begrudgingly remembering
another startling diagnosis:
mildly anorexic*

*the quiet in the room
speaks loudly
of dreams cut short
of marvels unexplored
of wishes the colour of wild strawberries
sealing the soul*

*life expectancy
constantly recalculated*

April 28, 2024—Heartbreak

An attention-grabbing concept is the broken heart syndrome (Paris, 2011, p. 120). I know it intimately not only through actually experiencing the syndrome after an excruciating betrayal in 2017 that paralyzed me for a while, but also because I had to explain it to students back in 2012. I did not have extensive knowledge about trauma then, but I remember discussing Sofia Kovalevsky's death with my grade twelve class. We were studying Alice Munro's short story "Too Much Happiness," a fictional biography of the famous Russian mathematician, with an open ending that blurred medical diagnosis with an imaginary account, suggesting Kovalevsky died of heartbreak. I remember my students' surprised, sceptical faces, and I wish I were able to share with them Paris' depth psychological and neuroscientific elucidation of the lethal experience Munro describes.

Heartbreak is at the bottom of my inability to forgive. But I don't want heartbreak to be the legacy I leave behind.

My son's question after my most recent diagnosis: "What do you want your legacy to be?" spurred a profound contemplation of the losses, small and giant, I face. A radical shift in my sense of time is the most obvious change: mortality no longer an abstract idea but a constantly growing awareness of life's finitude, medical procedures and doctors' appointments dictating my daily routines. I sit in / with the sadness, at times an overwhelming lava-like heavy liquid, I let the fears colour my mind chalk-white, and only attentiveness to the sensorial oscillations: heartbeat, breath, chest-sounds, nerve pain, itchy skin, face-puffiness, etc., alert me to a different life that beats through and into me, soul-gushing in poetic lines "working [a] way through to meaning" (Renzenbrink, 2021, p. 127). The restructuring of the most central aspects of my being take place by way of creating a "fragmented totality" (Levine as cited in Renzenrbink, 2021, p. 119) as arting helps me to express who my being was, is, and is becoming. "The language of grief" (MacWilliam, 2017) provides the non-words to piece together a kaleidoscopic mirroring of the losses and traumas that brought me to this place / life stage.

Heartbreak is also at the bottom of my father's mighty sorrow and his clamming up towards the world, sheltering the anguish and pain his body has carried for his entire life. According to Hay (2004), "a refusal to deal with the world as it is," hopelessness and anger are the emotional correlates of dementia (p. 164). The spontaneous image *Facing Reality*, probably was called forth by the somatic empathy I felt for my dad when I saw him struggling to remember words, to make decisions, to feel safe, yet he still smiled, and enjoyed Life in his quiet, guarded, and solitary way. It is the upshot of

resonances and vibrations at the most embryonic depths of our bloodstream, connecting the two of us as kin. I am really talking both genetics and epigenetics here, but also the unconscious ancestral and archetypal fields where primordial Love resides. I still don't conceptually understand what somatic empathy is, but my flesh knows it well, and my creativity follows it, giving an outward expression in lines, shapes, colours, and arrangements conveying the harmonizing frequencies of the deep suffering both my dad and I share.

It is worth noting that I have never heard татко complementing my mother's blooming houseplants on their beauty, but this summer, he did. Today, on his name day (also, one of the most important Bulgarian Christian spring celebrations, Цветница), he talked about the roses in the garden where they had the festive lunch. My conversation with him, across the ocean and in a virtual space, by means of a video chat, was short but sweet indeed. He was relatively lucid, sharing with me his joy of seeing the blossoming trees, feeling the sun's warmth, the spring air's ambience, noticing a green fruit on the cherry tree my mom missed, already beginning to round and grow.

Hope. Promise. Rebirth. Green cherry and green colour choosing me when I painted the digital piece *Facing Reality*, featured in the previous song-soul track. The love between us, greening, too. My way of bearing witness from Turtle Island-Canada, across the globe, to my dad's trials with his fast progressing illness, agonizingly and yet gently transform us in ways I never would have imagined. His anger, hurt, confusion, fears and my "ambiguous loss" (Renzenbrink, 2021, p. 128) crystalize into harrowing, love-giving and life-sustaining beauty.

Beauty is what at this moment connects us. Beauty is a healing pathway we both walk, and to my understanding, Life is still a source of pleasure for him even though, according to the psychologist who came to assess татко a few weeks ago, he has lost all of his capacities but the survival instincts, including his ability to experience emotions. I beg to differ! And, this is where the inadequacy of our understanding of dementia and other so-called "brain" dis-eases is disturbingly clear. Playing on words, here: the symbolic language of these dis-orders has never been addressed in mainstream psychiatry, psychology, and allopathic medicine. So, I will be sceptical about what these evidence-based disciplines have to say regarding the illness's origin, symptoms, and progression, looking for clues to a new understanding within a tangled matrix of psychosomatic-mythopoetic intuitive inklings and sensorial stirrings. To begin, let's lay down some intriguing facts I learned about the archetypal footings of my dad's name day, which I did not know until now.

Цветница (or Връбница) is associated with a biblical story, an established part of Christian lore, recounting Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem with his disciples around the time of the Jewish Passover,

AFTER he resurrects Lazarus magically. People gathered in thousands to honour the miracle, and threw flowers and palm or olive branches at Jesus' feet, who entered Jerusalem on a donkey's back, giving the message that he has the power to defeat Death.

Underneath the Christian layer is an older tale, tied closely to pagan beliefs and the ancient Bulgarian spring rituals and ceremonies, which honour the Great Round. Instead of palm and olive branches, the tree of choice is the willow, playing an important role in the spring initiations of young girls and unmarried women, but I will not go into details about these here. Suffice it to say is that willow branches according to these beliefs have healing and protective properties, used to deter evil forces and cure pain (Редактори на Уикипедия, 2024).

Protecting and healing from pain. From my trauma studies, I know that such defence could easily turn into tormentor, harming the adult individual and furthering the damage already done to the organism's immune, nervous, digestive, respiratory, and other life-supporting systems, in this way severing the connection to one's felt sense of wellness and wellbeing, eroding their health. When we hold onto past hurts, unable to forgive, our entire being is affected: physically, there are symptoms of sickness; emotionally, the disturbances may lead to addictions, or other psychological disorders; intellectually, our cognitive abilities and memory are compromised, and we lose our relationship to the Great Mystery, in other words to one's sacred, numinous core. A lot of imbalances, it appears!

So, dementia is my father's guard / oppressor and his way of keeping at bay the anguish his traumas have caused. Over his lifetime, emotions such as loss, anger, resentment, bitterness, guilt, and shame were not transformed into empathy, love, self-compassion, and self-care, leading to his present day woes. The processes of forgiveness, including self-forgiveness, permit the release of dark excitations, turned toxic, so a consciousness of a different kind springs forth: open, connected, reciprocal, receptive, giving, empathetic, and integrated—whole.

A mystery novel I read recently offers me one of the best explanations of what happens to a person suffering from dementia. I will cite a long passage here because it contains everything I am coming to understand about my dad's inner world, stressing again, that it is an inner world, which mainstream psychology and psychiatry refuse to acknowledge and considers, well ... metaphorically speaking, dead. My dad is very much alive, but certainly, for those around him, he has vacated the personal container we call the 'self.' In their eyes, he is not himself, that is, he is not the person he used to be. An inhabitant of an ambiguous liminal realm where those who take care of him cannot enter and he himself cannot leave.

"We've got time all wrong, you see," says Stephen, his head in Elizabeth's lap. "Do you see?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," says Elizabeth. "We get most things wrong, don't we?"

"Quite so," agrees Stephen, his voice quiet. "Nail hit well and truly on the head there, old girl. We think time travels forward, marches on in a straight line, and so we hurry alongside it to keep up. Hurry, hurry, mustn't fall behind. But it doesn't, you see. Time just swirls around us. Everything is always present. The things we've done, the people we've loved, the people we've hurt, they are all still here."

...

"That is what I have come to understand," says Stephen. "My memories are like emeralds, clear and bright and true, but every new day crumbles like sand, and I can't get a hold of it all."

...

"It has shown me the lie of the thing," says Stephen. "The lie of time. Everything I have done and everything I've been is present in the same place. But we still think the thing has just happened, or is about to happen, we think that's the most important thing. My memories aren't memories, my present isn't present, it is all the same thing, Elizabeth!" (Osman, 2023, p. 241-242).

What I think is that my dad's dementia-altered physical brain structure actually opens him up to a different experience of time, to an atemporal, alternate reality where Life's events are stacked on top of each other, seemingly a random collection of memories, yet there is a narrative: yes, it is fragmented for us, who seek the cohesion of a plotline moving from beginning to middle to end. And so, it is a disjointed totality the demented consciousness dwells in. Associative connections, which we are not typically prepared to follow, pop up, ostensibly erratically, too. But it is all from the perspective of the one witnessing and judging the dementia suffering person from a conventional "third person" point of view.

And so we perceive loss, and we grieve, and we don't enjoy the precious little gold nuggets the afflicted individual gifts us.

I listened carefully to my dad's stories this summer, trying to do just that: follow the truncated lines to memories co-existing in an atemporal time flow in his mind. And the conclusion I reach now is this: because we have 'four' different bodies (as mentioned before—physical, emotional, intellectual, and cosmic, or spiritual, for the lack of a better word), the imbalance a disease like dementia produces affects all but the cosmic body, which is intact and functioning well, as my dad's ability to appreciate beauty attests. His instinctive drive for survival, too, is connecting him to a world below the threshold of consciousness, in an archetypal, non-verbal, vibrational flux of wave-particles making up the warped memory landscape, gradually levelling to an unrecognizable

(from the outside) terrain. Art creations, then, whether the person is creating, or sharing with another their joy of receiving the healing vibes from perceived art pieces, are essential in a therapeutic process. This summer, intuitively, I applied this knowledge to my dad, with whom we recited poetry, sang songs, coloured animals, and played with a ball. We went for walks. We attuned to each other's love. I felt it energetically, and continue to feel it every time he smiles at me, every time I touch the objects his no longer skilled hands have made for me.

I read in an online essay that people suffering from dementia turn backwards in their development, becoming children, then toddlers, then infants, in a regression, which to anyone 'normal' looks as if the adult they knew is gradually (or more quickly) disappearing. But here is what I wrote in a discussion forum post, which makes me question the vantage point from which we explain dementia and treat it.

Dear colleague,

Your comment about optimism towards life being a defense mechanism struck a cord, and your wondering about how your father experiences the loss of his younger, "unwrinkled, invulnerable, and immortal" (Renzenbrink, 2021, p. 122) self made me wonder about the way my father's world feels to him as his memory crumbles, and with that, his sense of self erodes, both his present and future changed profoundly. He lives in the past, but even that reality is fragmented, distorted, and locked in him because he cannot sustain a thought long enough to tell a coherent story. His web of life (Attig, 2011, p. xxxiv) has shrunk significantly since he retired, and now, he is even more isolated because of his dementia. Attig (2011) suggests that grieving is about "relearning the world" (p. xxiv). I also wonder how the vocabulary of "ego, soul, and spirit," (Attig, 2011, p. xxxiii) could help my father come to terms and make new meaning of and within this drastically unfamiliar life where his fears run superior to hope. How he "[attends] to [his] hurt," or seeks "guidance for learning the world" (Attig, 2011, p. xxxiii)? How could he tell his story of grieving in its particulars and unique insights? Ultimately, witnessing my dad's struggles makes me question theoretical models of grief and loss not accounting for the non-verbal, bodily "language of grief" (MacWilliam, 2017).

It makes me question theoretical models of dementia and forgiveness, too. Forgetting and forgiveness being intricately interwoven.

In another discussion forum post, what I wrote is also relevant to my contemplation. Here is the response I penned to a different online participant.

Dear colleague,

Your intention to connect with your mom through Polish poetry moved me, for it reminded me of reciting Bulgarian poetry with my father last summer. "Attachment," writes MacWilliam, "is a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects a person to another across time and space" (2017, p. 31).

When I see my dementia-afflicted dad, who is also hard of hearing, during the Sunday video chats with my mom, the smile on his face, the hand-wave, and the eager tone of his voice when he asks my mom whether I was calling, constantly remind me of the truth that getting to the other side of suffering, I am able to find “ways of loving that do not require physical presence” (Attig, 2011, p. xxxi).

And forgiveness, then, becomes easier because I start with Love rather than anger or hate.

Tatko is reshaping his identity, and with him, I am reshaping mine as well. “Restoration of wholeness, inner direction and an ability to see other people and situations in their own right—separate from an ordinary ego-centric view” (Long, 2017, p. 101). My adopting of a non-dual perspective truly affords the joy and love between us to flow, and forgiveness to settle into the heart, changing it profoundly. It is a paradigmatic shift (to use the fancy western philosophical term), conveying the far-reaching change that happened to my perspective and interpretation of my dad’s existence. Forgiveness is about a “change of perception, altered consciousness, and sense of interdependence with others” (Long, 2007, p. 103). None of the popular models of forgiveness—cognitive, emotional, social, psychological, or religious / spiritual—adequately reveal an immensely more complex and nuanced deeper truth.

A psychological approach to identity is limiting and reductive because it considers it from an intrinsic point of view, tracing what constitutes one’s personhood, its continuity over time, and its change (Long, 2017, p. 106). Establishing identity markers—some important relationships to be present in order to assert one has an identity—is the main caveat. Thus, depending on the manifestation and the degree to which such psychological structures, like traits, beliefs, memories, emotions, and expectations are present, one is a person with an identity and a sense of self. (Hence, I know this is precisely what the psychologist measured to determine that my father was ‘gone’! There was no self and personal identity according to her tests, which lasted for more than an hour). He is existing, in her account, at a purely survival level, which I believe is closer to the way animals, plants, rocks, and other beings in this world partake in the Great Mystery. My dad is very much a part of this mystery, and I would even like to venture a guess that he might be more attuned to it than any of us ‘normal-conscious’ people are.

I am adopting both Long’s philosophical account (2017) and a mythopoetic interpretation of the dis-ease, which is art-based, coming from the imaginal realm, and needing no words to clothe it since it invites an intuitive grasp. Yes, I use words in the collage, but they are not the primary medium. Focus on the images and the mood when looking at it. Focus on bodily resonances, relayed through sensorial changes felt just below the level of consciousness.

Let me elaborate further. A person's identity is multifaceted: a social self envelops a subjective self because we are embedded in social structures conditioning our relationships to others and to our own being. Both the social and the personal self are complementary in establishing the ways human beings think, feel, and act in the various contexts they experience their identities throughout their lives. The integration of the social and personal self comes in various degrees, affecting also the extent to which the individuals identify with their social self. And so, depending on the paradigmatic understanding of what the true nature of the 'self' is, the multitude of philosophical approaches developed over the millennia, represent a spectrum ranging from "essentialism" to "eliminativism" (Long, 2017, p. 107). It is not my intention to discuss each one of these. But the key point I am making is that Long proposes a viewpoint which makes sense to me. Deep forgiveness resides in profound wisdom that is not simply consciousness-bound: deep forgiveness we experience intuitively-somatically and archetypally. And so, it feels like a miracle, or a revelation, or an epiphany. But I believe it is stirred through connections to the wisdom of the Earth as described in Lao Tzu's Taoist text and an attunement to the rhythms of the cyclical processes of birth-growth-decay-death-and rebirth. Revivification and transformation, returning to the energetic field of the web-of-Creation, which the ancient Chinese sage calls the Tao.

... Things arise and [the person] lets them come;
things disappear and she lets them go.
She has but doesn't possess,
Acts but doesn't expect.
When her work is done, she forgets it.
That is why it lasts forever. (Lao Tzu, 1988/2006, chapter 2)

And also:

The Tao doesn't take sides;
it gives birth to both good and evil.
The [sage] doesn't take sides;
she welcomes both saints and sinners.

The Tao is like a bellows:
It is empty yet infinitely capable.
The more you use it, the more it produces;
the more you talk of it, the less you understand.

Hold on to the center. (Lao Tzu, 1988/2006, chapter 5)

Revisiting Long, an idea strikes me: a felt, intuitively grasped insight that there is “no transcendent self owning the past injuries.” Losing the ‘self’ opens a person up to the truth of simultaneously acknowledging and releasing “an event, an experience, a memory, or an intention,” and “[replacing] it with another,” immersed in the flux and constant mutability of the river of Life. A different view of self and other, averting the destruction of oneself (Long, 2017, p. 113), perhaps is what supports it, but here I am getting into the linguistic, cognitive, conventional understanding of being, becoming, and time.

Recognizing my father’s suffering as not the only human suffering out there, or that his suffering is not so uniquely significant in the grand scheme of things, expands me and propels me on my journey of growth. It is absurd to think of dementia as thrusting my father on the journey of growth, but in some profound way, it is. The fundamentally healing way here is “sensing a reality that is radically interdependent and a self that is not immutable, thus connecting to the possibility of reconnecting with others” (Long, 2017, p. 114). How do I connect in all of Nature’s varied ways to my dementia-afflicted father who is losing language but not his desire to live and his openness to beauty’s touch?

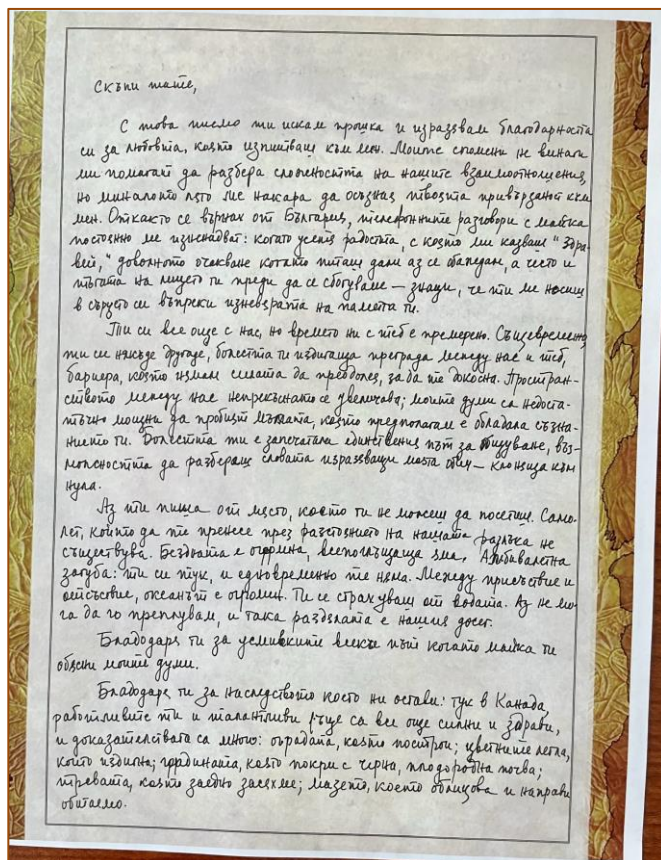
So, to conclude. My dad’s condition is asking of him to re-orient his inner world and form a new identity, one conventional notions of identity are unable to account for. The process of forgiveness I have undergone is also related to a drastic shift in my personal identity, which has afforded me a novel interpretation of the reality of our relationship. In both cases, it is an ontological shift that ripples also to the ways of knowing feeding my new philosophical outlook, and the values supporting my interpretations and understanding of self, Other, and the world. But I also believe it is an ontological shift bringing about one more dimension. I don’t have a name for it and will call it mythopoetical. The collage is its perceptible materialization.

Expressive Artting: Collage – Searching for new memories now

Intention

The collage is for my dad who has been suffering from dementia since 2022, after a Covid-19 infection. My dad's birthday, synchronistically, is on March 18, and my gratitude letter, together with the collage, which I completed on March 5, 2024, are beautiful gifts for him. He is turning 82.

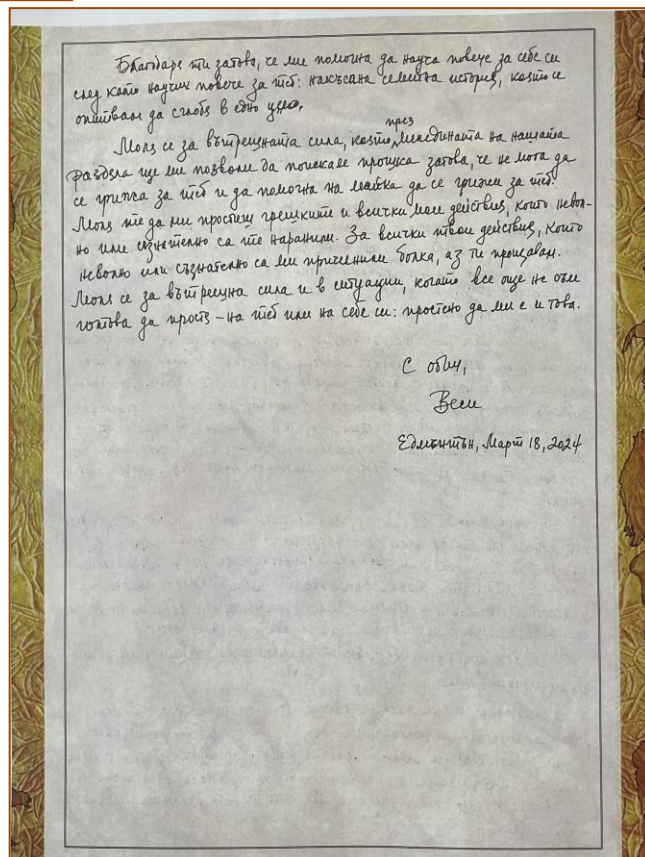




I have no recollection of my dad hugging or holding me. But his hands to me are the epitome of him, or rather, of who he is: previously, now, and in the future. I am grateful for their gifts, which are still with me. And ... for his smile....

I am stepping timidly into the space of my relationship with dad. My handwriting, initially difficult, is slow and deliberate, occasionally stalling before the correct line, or curve, or swirl comes to me. Here and there, I wait for the warmth in my heart to drive me forward. English letters pop up uninvited. I send them back to oblivion.

My body remembers the walks with dad last summer: taking a step so slowly, time hangs on the tree branches, cracking sunflower seeds with its teeth. I am holding my dad's hand. A rare experience. He is so feeble, like a brittle blade of grass, bearing the freezing kisses of winter. The winter of his elderly years. Then, ... he smiles.



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9 | SELF-WORTH SEESAW

Expressive Landmark 15: May 6, 2023

body-light

if my body had a voice
what story would she tell?

i am at war. every morning
the mirror-general commands me.

going into the world
i weave a mask, put on a costume
so flexible and strong,
it wraps me like an army blanket,
known for its capacity to preserve the body's heat
to keep me warm when the coldness of
strangers' eyes
shrinks me

a cocoon so tight, it suffocates me—
hiding curves and plumpness
my sturdy frame,
the heavy feeling of disgust
underneath
a cheerful façade

i am not my own strength
i am not my own stability
i am not my own impressive ability to stand
on a balance beam
with one leg air-born
or cartwheeling,
tumbling
on a 100 mm wide wooden plank

i am able to support myself
i am able to flexibly bend or flip or stretch or hold
as needed,
twisting or dive rolling
with Life's incessant curve balls

i am the sacred vessel hosting what became

the persona's pride and source of satisfaction: cut off
from me, the intelligence turned into an ego-prison
my downfall
on several occasions:
a tragic story of disunity

re-learning unity
rekindling curiosity
to the amazing potential
in aging
when all that was is lost
more cherished in the flickering
light of remembrance
the young, strong, chubby 10-year-old girl

i give you my love

The Self-Worth Seesaw

Cold gusts of wind howl in the dark. The lantern's white light flickers incessantly, shadows dancing on the faces of the ox-like shouldered men and the tarpapered walls of the bunkhouse. I am perched on a top bunk, staring at the crew of loggers playing cards: frozen for hours on end, silent and serious, they speak only when placing bets. My willowy body shivers. Dirty army blankets pulled tightly to my chin: my cocoon. I keep myself safe in this game of light and shadows, flashing images of delicate glass roses shattering when the first German bombs fall on Ternopol (Nowlan, 1968).

I am not the boy who listens to poignant war stories, but I am fighting a war. Every morning since my elementary school years, I have woken up in an invisible firing line, the enemy—my own body. I have been in this combat zone for over forty years. Re-reading Alden Nowlan's short story "The Glass Roses," an insight sparks: my body-image, an unacknowledged hostility to my fleshy container, a semiconscious envy that comparisons with other women have engendered, my obsession with weight, shape, fitness, and my figure are the source of an unattended wound, a wobbly foundation for my self-worth. These feelings have always lurked beneath awareness, too ready to ambush me when I look in the mirror, but the candlelight of consciousness, flickering, presently reveals a shadowy face.

I am probably eight or ten. The exact day or year is hard to pin down, for the memory itself has been buried deep until now. Representatives from Slavia Athletic Club have come to the school

to select children for training in Acrobatic gymnastics. I am one of the chosen girls to join the team, an event that should have been a source of pride but instead became a source of shame.

My classmate Mariana is a slim, small girl, quiet and withdrawn. We live in the same apartment building, a few entrances apart. I don't remember interacting with her a lot. We are not friends. She is a girl I notice only at recess on the playground or when we chance upon each other in the grocery store, accompanying our parents on their shopping trips. Mariana, however, is the star of the small group of girls from our school who became members of the Slavia Acrobatic Gymnastics Club. She is agile. She is precise. She is diligent. She is passionate about the work our bodies are tasked with. Because I am taller and chubbier than her, I am appointed to be part of the base, supporting the athlete standing atop who performs the trickiest balancing positions, tumblings, and flips. In my young and envious eyes, she is the team star. Mariana. Always Mariana. My envy of her, clearly bubbling to the surface now.

I did not like the sport, so I did not last long in the program, but the distaste, perhaps even loathing of my body, is the psychological boulder I have carried (and persist on lugging) to this day. I pick it up every morning when I go to the scale to weigh myself. So, at this point, I ask: What would my body say if she had a voice? Have there been moments when I liked my shape, weight, the fleshy toughness my body has afforded me, the firmness, the solidity, and the groundedness it embodies?



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, May 6). *Seesaw* [Digital art].

Caught in a seesaw play between two sets of values, I rise and fall against my shadow. Hope and despair, self-compassion and envy. At my age, it is difficult to break habitual defense patterns, to stop comparing, to rescript the false narrative of my identity as a worthy human being, paying attention to the body-image I actually *see*, not the one I *saw* as an impressionable young girl. What is healthy for me now may not be considered attractive, but it is impossible to separate the voice of popular media culture and the dark whispers of doubt, aversion, and shame, which years of denial have silicified in the unconscious. A fifteen-year-old fictional character opens up a space for the pain unrealistic expectations about women's looks have inflicted, creating a balancing beam on which my perception of who I am and who I can be hangs precariously.

My relationship with my body is complicated, the seesaw motion of a swing accurately conveying the appearance and disappearance of the enemy that mass culture ideals of femininity: slim, long-legged, firm-muscled, and hourglass shaped have impressed. My body goes into battle poorly equipped to fight the dejection of never being perfect enough to measure up to the images of models, athletes, and film stars. It was three days ago that I thought deeply about the unidentified hurt I have been bearing, mirrored not in another woman's experience, but in the struggles of a slender, sensitive, and imaginative adolescent male character in a fictional story.

Where does my reflection leave me? At my age, appearance should not matter. Body-image should not be an issue. Yet, it is. So, what could heal the wound and free me from a stone I don't want to carry on, the seesaw swing—unsafe and tricky? To stop the swing at a balance point, I have to keep reminding myself that I cannot carry more weight than what is on the other side of the levelled board. The equidistant plastic covered seats can stay in equilibrium only if the pendulum of my emotions does not fluctuate wildly. Too much self-worth others can mistake for bragging. Too little self-worth, and my shadow suspends me in the air, without a way to get down, except jumping from the seesaw and abandoning the playground all together. What will I choose tomorrow?

The flickering light of my understanding is that my self-worth is what I consciously mirror back to my body: self-love, self-compassion, and gratitude for all I have endured and what has been given to me over the years of growing into a unique and beautiful individual. For indeed my body is wise and knowledgeable, the champion of my self-esteem.

May 6, 2023 later in the day: Amplification

Re-reading my notes on *Blind Vaysha*, an animated short film by Theodore Ushev (2016), I sense heaviness in my lower legs and feet. The precise words that bring this sensation are: ...traumatic memories remain frozen in time. Incapable of remembering the psychic wound as an experience with a beginning and an end, a traumatized individual continuously relives the past. The present has no value or significance because the past is where the traumatized person dwells. For the cycle to be broken, time must be experienced as a flow. Though the future is unknown, our memories help us to find solutions in situations we have not encountered before. Thus, a healthy sense of self is grounded in the experience of time as a current, not as distinct and isolated rivulets of memories and foresights. (Balinska-Ourdeva, 2020)

After reading this writing, I feel slightly dizzy, a nausea sticking to my tightened throat, blocking the larynx. According to Hay (2004), nausea is a sign of fear, a rejection of an idea or experience (p. 187). I have suffered from vertigo for more than a decade, the onset dating back to my 2010 Bulgarian trip. The two symptoms are related, for dizziness is also a sign of refusal to look (Hay, 2004, p. 165). In this case, I have refused to look at the source of my body-image, long preceding the envy and shame I experienced when joining the athletic club. *Blind Vaysha*

symbolically amplifies the hidden meanings of the unsolicited seesaw image I drew, for the roots of the psychic wound grow deep into the family soil of my maternal lineage: grandmother, grandaunt, and mother, possibly even my great-grandmother despite having scant knowledge of her personal history.

It is difficult to begin the narrative from the wound's point of origin because I don't know the facts. Yet, from what I have pieced together, the hostility and neglect of my body are inherited traits from my mother who not that long ago shared a shocking secret about sexual abuse she endured as a young woman.

My father is not my mom's first marriage. There was another man, but if he was the abuser and the reason for the divorce, I am not sure. My mom is not exactly open to sharing her pain though she did acknowledge its effects: her own contempt for her physical body, which has been a source of suffering since her late twenties: kidney problems, hypertension, cardiac



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (1974, May). *Grade One Graduation* [Photograph]. Sofia, Bulgaria.

arrhythmia, diverticulitis, allergies, depression—the list is incomplete. An unfortunate cholera vaccination after being exposed to the bacteria in her workplace seems to have been the cause of some of these health conditions. She was initially diagnosed with mesenteric lymphadenitis, which was treated with tuberculosis antibiotics that led to allergies and consequent stomach and kidney problems. It happened in 1972 when I was six years old.

If my mom was struggling to take care of herself, her parents, her children while also working as a full time registered nurse, it is no surprise my grandma rather than my mom shows up in the photo of my grade one graduation. I still feel the empty space behind me where my mom should have been.

The sense of abandonment is woven through all of my infancy and childhood years and stitched into my fantasy to be born the princess of a never-never land. A princess has beautiful

things. A princess is special. Everyone looks at her and admires her beauty, grace, and talents. Dreaming of being a princess comforts me. Sleeping in the same bedroom where my grandparents slept, I turn my back to them and wall off myself from the world demanding of me to be an obedient daughter and a responsible older sister. So, my people-pleaser persona I learnt how to wear as a protective shield for the parts that poked through and revealed my true nature. To this day, I put my mask on any time I don't want my power to be known, showing sides of my being I am sure others want to see. Here, however, I plunge further back into the past.

“The relationship with the body begins in the inter-uterine life and is marked from the beginning by heredity” (*PRH*, 2007, p. 93).

When my grandmother was pregnant with mom, she witnessed a dreadful forest fire that left her terrified and anxious for a long time afterwards. Doctors' appointments, medication, and visits to traditional healers helped her to regain balance, but the psychological scars hardly would have been erased. My mother believes a birthmark behind her ear is a reminder of my grandmother's horror, for she considers it to be the exact place where старимайка touched herself while looking at the raging blaze.

The story of my mom's birth, too, is complicated. My grandmother's appendicitis ruptured during the delivery, and she had to spend six months hospitalized while my mom's paternal grandmother took care of the newborn. Goat milk, which my grandfather's mother bought from a local woman selling it in front of the hospital, and chewed bread, sprinkled with sugar, were the first food my mom swallowed, and with that, an early disruption in her bond with her mom occurred. My grandmother could not breastfeed, hence the intimacy nursing affords through physical touch and the immediate release of oxytocin, my mom did not experience, boring the first hole in the relationship between mother and daughter.

When she was forty, my grandmother had her uterus and ovaries removed, resulting in hormonal disturbances, high blood pressure, and other afflictions which led to her early disability retirement. In a letter to me, my mom literally writes: “After your grandmother's surgery, I grew up and understood I was responsible for [my parents].” At twenty years old, my mom began to mother her mother, reversing the natural flow of love from parent to child. All this happened three years before I was born. Wolynn's observation, confirmed by scientific evidence on epigenetic factors, explains the significance of these events: “Even if humans receive supportive parenting as infants, we are still recipients of the stress our parents [even grandparents] experienced before we were conceived” (2016, p. 37/241). Shannon Zaychuk, a family constellations therapist, adds: “life flows

with certain rank and order. Those who come first must carry their fate; no one who comes later is allowed to carry the fate of the preceding generation, but when the rank and order are disrupted, energies become entangled in the family field,” therefore children may carry the burdens of preceding generations (2017).

Compounded effects from a disaster trauma, separation after birth, and additional stress my grandma experienced during my mom’s infant years since my grandfather was away fighting in WWII, may have influenced the formation of my mom’s blueprint, making her more stress-sensitive and prone to depression. Poole Heller explains: “parents with unresolved attachment injuries tend to pass their wounds to their children” (2019, p. 83/205). It is also interesting that my mom described старимайка as “shy” and “ambitious,” though I think she meant to say my grandmother had a strong sense of respectability, pride, and duty. The contradictory attributes point to a complicated relationship my grandma might have had with her own body, fear of shameful vulnerability producing her shyness (Jacoby, 2002, p. 6). While I perceive my grandma as conscientious rather than ambitious, my interpretation of her personality relates back to her capacity to uphold social norms, instilled through a patriarchal upbringing and a tight bond with my great-grandfather, whom, as my mom assures me, старимайка adored. The faceless dark female figure in the seesaw image thus acquires a name: the Sarsen Woman, a frustrated *yin* energy passed down from mother to daughter, representing the interruptions in the flow of motherly love in my family.

December 18, 2023

It is only a speculation, but it might have been that my grandma was a ‘daddy’s girl,’ neglected from her own mother who suffered the loss of her second daughter, and whose youngest child, my grandaunt, needed constant attention and care because of her illness. My grandmother took care of her father when he fell sick and before his death, fulfilling her obligations of a loyal oldest daughter. My grandpa paid for my grandaunt’s education, probably leaving a bitter taste in my grandma’s mouth, whose academic ambitions never came to fruition because the family supported her youngest sister to finish an education degree and become a teacher. My own memories, as unreliable as these are, confirm the impression that my great-grandmother and старимайка were distant, a bond that life circumstances and loss had probably unsettled. Poole Heller’s observation is also helpful here: “a parent [preoccupied] with their own attachment wounds, an injury suffered from their own parents [can easily transmit it] to their own child” (2019, p. 84/205). The extent to

which a repair happened, I cannot guess, but it certainly leaves me with more questions and inklings about the intergenerational trauma that might be at the roots of my current health conditions. Even more direct must be the links to the shame and wariness of my physical body I continue to feel. Our mothers are the place where we land in our body as we grow. We don't just have a set of chromosomes, but also there are tags that account for variability because they read environment and accordingly feed information to the genes, switching them on and off. The epigenome lays the body down according to its environment; when the environment changes, the epigenome starts giving different messages. (Zaychuk, 2017)

A revealing dream from February 22, 2017 points to unconsciously transferred shamefast attitudes toward the female body I have absorbed from my mom. Unpacking the dream, forty-two years later, creates a safe space for the pain to be felt and embodied while I allow myself to sink into a marsh of humiliating memories, kept alive below the threshold of consciousness.

Dreams have the uncanny power to unveil and let the unconscious wounds heal as the conscious mind makes sense of the fragmented story the body remembers.

My grandmother is helping me clear the yard because a friend of mine, Irzhi, is coming for a visit. My friend is older than me, and a young woman I admire. She and I sing together in the Children's Choir. I want to be like her. I want her to notice me. I want her to like me. But, my friend does not come. Instead, I am terrified to find my mother's brassiere on a rock, clearly showing when I swipe away the dry autumn leaves covering the boulder. Alarmed, I gasp: shame, thick, suffocating, crimson red! My chest shrinks, my shoulders slouch, I want to fold myself in half to protect my body from exposure. There is diffidence, too. Such a private piece of clothing cannot be lying on a rock! I feel the fire in my cheeks, bright red and hot. Heaviness pins me to the ground, my body feels unwanted and ugly. The image of bare breasts almost chokes me. In my stomach, the shame restlessly lands, against the walls on the inner side of its cavity, and my breathing is laboured. The boulder is moss-covered, grey and round, shrouded by bushes, but the brassiere's white cups are starkly visible. I am unclothed, completely unprotected. I am ashamed for my mother and of my mother. I am utterly confused and winded; I have no idea what all this means when I wake up.

Brené Brown defines shame as intensely painful feeling of disconnection because we are afraid we are fundamentally flawed, unlovable, unworthy of affection. It isolates us from others and puts us in a place of judgment: secrecy and silence feeding the fear that keeps us separated (2021, pp. 327; 329). From a very young age, I obviously saw my body as a shameful 'object' through my mother's eyes.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (1982). *Irzhi and I* [Photograph]. Sofia, Bulgaria.

The body is our biological container, the source of our energetic supply and replenishment. Our bodies are also the holder of our dignity, closely related not only to our wellbeing but also to our personal and social identities. A distorted body-image reflects a distorted sense of self, an unstable foundation to develop self-worth and self-respect. As my poem above makes it clear, I

have an ambivalent relationship with my body, which mirrors an ambivalent attachment style

formed as a protective mechanism in my infancy and childhood because of an insecure relationship with my parents, especially my mom. But, in this exploration I have also uncovered an inherited pattern of ruptured bonds between mothers and daughters in my familial history, and yet the cultural implications are not lost on me. At the time of my growing up in Bulgaria, ideals of the perfect female body were abundant, propagated primarily through advertisements and films, so what I saw on TV certainly influenced my perception of how my body should look like and be.

An anecdote illustrates the earliest conscious and shameful memory I have about my body. The remembrance dates back to my elementary school. We were taken to an outdoors swimming pool in a physical education class during the summer of my grade three year. I recall the line up of girls in front of the line up of boys, from tallest to shortest. Because I am of medium height, I happen to be in the middle of the row, standing right at the edge of the pool, marvelling at the sparkling reflections of sunlight on the tranquil, blue-tile coloured water. It is a distraction because I am also painfully aware of my uncovered chest, wearing a bikini bottoms swimsuit, knitted of red wool, no top part. I detest it. I am afraid everyone is looking at my naked budding feminine breasts. I am angry with my mother who refused to buy me a two-piece bottom-and-top swimsuit, rationalizing her decision with the belief that I was still a little girl and did not need it. My chest shrinks, I want to lift up my arms and cover my breasts. I feel a wave of crimson red shame flood my body from head to toe. The sun shines brightly, too brightly perhaps because I feel it intensely on my back and blindingly in my eyes. I am paralyzed. I cannot move when the physical education teacher blows the whistle and signals for us to jump into the pool. What I recall is a sharp shove on

my back as one of my classmates, a boy who expressed his affection for me by trying to drown me while we were in the water, and in the pool I nosedive, unprepared, shocked, and gasping for air. The boy is right behind me, pushing my head down and pressing with both his hands on the crown. I wriggle and flap vigorously with my arms, trying to worm away from under his grasp. But the painful realization that none of the other girls in the class are bare-breasted is much more horrifying, the blush colour covering my entire, shaky body when I pull myself out of the water and flop exhaustedly on the cement slabs surrounding the pool. I feel “completely... degraded from head to foot... without [my] having done anything wrong” (Jacoby, 2002, p. 1). The fear of being shamed and in a vulnerable situation from that moment onward firmly lodged in my bodymind.

The fear of being shamed and the striving for perfection go hand-in-hand. In fact, it is my own expectations of having the perfect body according to all these ideal images of women I saw on the screen that added to the belief I was inadequate, which already was formed in my energetic awareness because of the frustrated relationship I had with my mother. The core sentence I wrote when exploring my paternal traumatic inheritance rings true as well, amplified with intense feelings of anxiety and shame, psychic predispositions already at play in my maternal family constellation. To protect myself from feeling ashamed, I developed two coping strategies: ignore my body and become hypersensitive to the needs of others, behaving in ways that would please and prioritize them over what my own soma and psyche needed. I became a people-pleaser, the persona most prominently ruling my behaviour and actions in relation to self and other. The consequence, Poole Heller describes as follows: “[When we ambivalently attach to people], we lose contact with ourself and reach out to others to get ourself back, but we end up abandoning ourself in the process” (2019, p. 87/205). With an insecure sense of self, I entered my marriage only to further surrender my independence and lose control of who I was at my core, of what I wanted, desired, aspired, and valued. For the next forty years, I self-betrayed over and over again.

My second conscious memory of being shamed is also from elementary school. I must have been eleven or twelve years old. The same boy, who pushed me into the pool on that wretched summer day in grade three, now did something even bolder. He carved his and my initials joined with a plus, an equal sign, and a heart on the elevator door leading to the floor where our apartment was. At the time, I was outright naïve about his feelings. Of course, trying to drown me did not exactly warm me up to him, but my innocence cost me another disgrace and judgment, with a consequent disconnection from my mom who responded to the childish expression of attraction with fury and unfairness. She came home embarrassed and enraged, thinking about what the

neighbours would say. And so, I was made to remove the carving, applying thick layers of paint on top to hide it, leaving me again feeling utterly degraded and disgraced for no wrong actions of my own. My awareness of being humiliated and my inability to fight back fuelled the shame I experienced then. My mother's actions simply reaffirmed the need for keeping to myself and distrusting her ability to understand my feelings, co-regulate, and provide me with the emotional support I craved. But, as an adult I now realize that the shameful feeling was also the "guardian of [my] individualization" (Jacoby, 2002, p. 21) despite the internal conflict it generated because I was forced to conform to the societal expectations about public expression of private feelings, sexuality, and body-image my mother embodied. The seeds of patriarchal family values grew into "skin shame," feelings the violation of socially sanctioned norms produced (Jacoby, 2002, p. 21), yet it also led to the birth of Artemis, a counterbalancing energy of "deep shame," coming into play when my inner sincerity, "the lattice of [my] deepest convictions" (Jacoby, 2002, p. 22) was breached. In other words, I cultivated a strong aptitude for justice and fair play to compensate for my dwindling trust in my parents' emotional and moral authority, the seesaw of frail self-esteem wildly vacillating between the poles of "social adaptation and personal integrity," "gauging my feelings about how close I can and want to let someone come" (Jacoby, 2002, p. 22).

The body allows access to the deepest aspects of the being, the wholeness and wellness of a person (PRH, 2007, p. 92). A body-image is a multifaceted amalgamation of subjective perceptions about one's own body, "the relationships others have had and continue to have with the person's body, and with the human body" in principle (PRH, 2007, p. 93). The following piece, written in 2014, reveals the confining limitations of my bodily sense. Not a fullness, not a vitality, but enclosure and rigidity I had a difficult time to break because it was my choice.

May 18, 2014: Journal entry

Two things happened today while my husband and I were jogging: first, I jumped and skipped the distance of ten concrete slabs, like I used to when I was a child. It made me feel silly but also released an internal smile. "Silly," the English word comes from the German selig, which Luther translated from the Greek as "the blessed." "Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of god" (Luke 6: 20). In German the word means "devout," "blessed," "devoted." I learnt this from a former colleague of mine.

The child is blessed and a blessing. The child is silly. I repeated my jump and skip routine three times (a magical number?), about ten concrete slabs each time. There were no people around, but I was conscious of being foolish.

No inner critic's voice but a clear out-of-body presence—the adult “I” looking at the playful child, except I did not see a child. I saw the forty-eight-year old woman doing a ludicrous thing. Yet, the heaviness in my body lifted when I did it for the third time.

The task, then, is to find a way to destroy the constraints I have imposed on my unloved body, to revive the inner child and strengthen my connection to her. I have to unwrap what I have wrapped. Layer after layer. One memory at a time.

Becoming curious about my feelings, especially those of joy, awe, wonder, love, and kindness, noticing the generosity of others, mostly my husband and son, but also my friends, who care for me and give me what I need, even if I don't always clearly articulate or receive it, and making more room for my being with compassion, gentleness, and appreciation for the gifts I carry: it is a first step. The pendulum gathers momentum as it begins to swing the other way: from shame to forgiveness, from self-doubt to self-love.

A pendulum follows a seesaw motion: of course, Levine's pendulation (2015) comes to mind, but I also circle back to the dictionary definition: “changing rapidly and repeatedly from one position, situation or condition to another and back again.” The wound I have ignored, the “seesawing” glimpses of my being: the solid and the leaky.

The process of forming the name “seesaw” or “teeter-totter” is reduplication, the redoubled syllable with a different vowel is the same and yet not the same. The pendulum motion is actually a spiral, not a circle, when the pendulum completes a full rotation around the fixed center. Now that I think of it, a complete rotation of the seesaw or pendulum will draw the medicine wheel representing the balance of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual bodies. Out of balance, a mask covers the disharmony. Taking it off, a naked truth is revealed. The neglected physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of my being, forming an unhealthy obsession with my fleshy container, not listening to what it needs, but subjecting myself to diets, stress, and like Nowlan's character, an “aching exhaustion” (1968, p. 1), are calling for a profound change and rebalancing of the self-worth seesaw.

It is hard to swing on a seesaw alone. But, is it fun to be on one end when the other person is heavier than me or exerts more pressure? I can do nothing to go down if the heavier person doesn't play fair. Being lighter is tricky. I depend on the balancing act of the heavier co-player. I am both the light and the heavier person: the ten-year-old vs. the adult, my healthy being vs. my shadow, the matrilineal psychological heritage the dark hump-backed shape represents.

The seesaw is a symbol of worthiness (Saul, 2013). “To dream of a seesaw indicates that your heart is full of joyful emotions” (Online dream dictionary). I hope this is true not because I want to

let go of the past but because I can start living a life of much more attuned bodyfulness (Caldwell, 2020). Getting stuck on what I imagine I should be will not get me where I want to be. The Sarsen woman I need to remind me that my body is not an object; my being is a living, breathing, loving and loved harmony, a soul-song (Bernard, 2023), which I protect but also sing when and to whom I decide. If I want to wear my masks, it is because I am also acutely aware of the power they grant me to choose. A new realization, not that long ago, connects the persona-mask, which the shameful feelings have birthed, to the magical object shamans and healers wear as a symbol of their rank, authority, competence, and mastery. A mask represents the spirits and is a vehicle to come into contact with them, turning the sight inward and letting the ego dissipate in order to enter into a consciousness state where one blends with the divine powers (Guo, 2002, p. 164). Masks are worn as part of the ritual and ceremonial actions that aim at warding off calamities, expelling demons, and granting favours and good fortune. It is armour to protect the soul (Guo, 2002, p. 168-169).

Feelings of shame can be felt and witnessed, and I can soothe myself by giving my younger 'I' what she needs because what is right for me, here and now, I already have. Unlike Blind Vaysha, the protagonist of Ushev's animation, I am able to hold in sight the flow of time not as independent rivulets but as a tide: emotions come and go; they peak and recede. Who I am is the observer, unattached and able to wonder about their movement. The wounds of shame would not have been so deep had I known how to deal with the embarrassing feelings, and in fact, to be proud of the transformation my body was undergoing. But in my family, this would have been impossible. So, thankfully the dream opened a healing path for my inferiority complex because I recognized the pattern: shame and fear that others will judge me inadequate because I judge myself this way. The new awareness and appreciation of my body, which breathing exercises, grounding, and centering, but most importantly my illnesses and afflictions, have brought to consciousness, offer my physicality much grace and gratitude. Indeed, my fleshly container still serves me well despite the long-lasting combat mode of our relationship. Jacoby's words are a hopeful adage: "As long as energies are flowing to us from the unconscious, energies that are affirmed by ego consciousness and experienced as 'ego-syntonic,' we feel inspired, in good form, and endowed with power and energy" (2002, p. 71).

Truly, my body is wise, knowing what is not right for me, waiting when the time is ripe for letting it go, and offering support when I could not find it elsewhere. My vessel of wholeness and loving, the gateway to my self-esteem.

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10 | A LETTER TO MY 16-MONTH-OLD SELF

Expressive Landmark 16: April 4–April 14, 2023

A Letter to My Sixteen-Month-Old Self:

By Way of Re\flex/ivity

An offering to my sixteen-month-old self and to my mom who could not take care of me the way I needed because she had her own hurt and pain to cope with. The series of images I created in the beginning of March. Van der Kolk's (2014) and Levine's (2015) trauma theories inform the creative expression, which is an attempt of re-scripting (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 216) a pre-verbal memory my body stores, recaptured through an anecdote my mom has shared with me on several occasions, most recently at the end of February this year. The creative expression encapsulates also a significant moment of emotional release when on March 9, 2023 several uncanny synchronicities led to reliving the experience of giving birth to my son. A consequent realization about the 'stoic mask' I keep putting on when feelings of loneliness and abandonment sadden my days is about a trauma explored through visualization, active imagination, and archetypal symbolic amplification, working with my therapist on re\writing my personal myth.

Epistolary prose, poetry, journaling, a braided counter-narrative, and re-renderings of the original Longing image intend to trace the "restructuring [of my] inner map" (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 213).



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, March 4). *Longing* [Colour pencils, chalk and oil pastels, rendered with Microsoft relaxed perspective, white].

Your soul is dark, mom—away, you are alone. I feel your distress, round, unstoppable tears wetting your face; little hands clasping the metal barrier—cold but familiar. You are here, pasted to the fence, day after day, waiting for her return in the afternoon. Your light. My mom.

hushed sobs
 watering
 tiny soul
 body heaving
 in pain
 cold hot
 river of tears
 flooding
 ground
 gripping
 wonted prison
 twisted knotting
 laboured breathing
 hole-hollowing harrow
 horror-full heart
 pleading for light
 burning flame
 inflamed afflicted
 enfolding the core
 a thorn-crown of love,
 of loss & longing
 for Mom



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, March 5). *Longing 1* [Original image, cropped and re-rendered with Microsoft glow edges filter].

The inner Mother to both of us, lovely in her outfit, summer flowers blooming on her dress, short-sleeved, arms tanned. Each Sunday, she takes you to the nearby park. Beautiful meadows carpeted in all colours, flowers aplenty. You are laughing, little one, tottering on two slim toddler feet; I see you caressing the grasses, lush verdant blanket, holding you strong. You run. Mom smiles. The bouquets you pleat for her, your small hands hugging tight. Mom's smile is forlorn, but I take you in my heart and let you pass the posies to her. Our "good-enough" Mom (Winnicott, 2005, pp. 13-14). There is darkness in her eyes. You are too young to understand. I embrace your innocence; I embrace the hollowness your little body hosts when mom turns her back to leave you, eagle-spread, teary-faced, pressed to the metal fence.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, March 5). *Longing 2* [Original image re-rendered with Microsoft photocopy filter].

no mother is ideal

*my mom's failed imperfections
growing out of sadness and guilt
her aching heart
I know from mine, as a mother*

to mother

fibrous, viscous love,

moon-florescent,

*infolding Hekate's three-directional gaze,
standing at a juncture,
intuiting a safer route
from maidenhood to womanhood to*

motherhood,

midwifing my young self, seeking truths

*"incrementally, from the vantage of
a present state—neither a state of
hyperactivation and overwhelm*

*nor a state of shutdown, collapse, and shame"*¹

"slow, meticulous, mindful attention

to subtle movements

unintentional and reflexive,

creating

novel

experiences

← *contradicting"*

my mother's paralytic separation,

"[laying] our

helplessness, frozen shame, grief, and

sense of loss

*to rest"*²

¹ Levine, 2015, p. 156.

Digression, 09-03-2023, Reliving My Son's Childbirth

(my therapist's office)

The cold sneaks through my jacket. I am wearing red and black. The scarf covers my shoulders, a complicated picture of plant life. I enter. I sit down comfortably on the chair. There are three of us in my therapist's office: her dog, her bird, a pineapple conure, and myself. I wait. A cup of tea appears on the table at my side, sending its minty scent in a cloud, swirling around me. My therapist takes her place in the chair across. We greet each other and honour with a minute of silence the sacredness of shared space while she lights a candle and places it on the table between us. She asks me how I have been. I have no idea that her seemingly safe questions about my son, his preoccupations, and health will lead me down a path of blood red and black. But it happens. First, my right nostril unexpectedly bleeds. Then, the parrot comes to peck me on the sleeve, walking up and down my arm, gently touching the crook of my neck with his beak.

My eyes are closed. A red rose blooms as my body screams, contraction after contraction searing my flesh. A belt of fire around my waist, belly and back cramping, pain shifting from front to rear. The hospital room is bleak, sterile, no signs of comfort, kindness, or compassion. My heart is a wild animal, panicked. I pace. Each step punctured with piercing pain. I moan, grinding my teeth, jaws clenched. My hands made into fists. I wait for the sun to shine. I am alone. Forsaken. I need my mom.

For thirty-three years, the painful memory of wanting my mom with me when I was giving birth to my son has lain dormant in the subterranean recesses of somatic memory that more recent experiences of abandonment have eclipsed. In the therapist's office, my mom's energy appears, crystalizing into the red-rose shape my hand holds for her in the dream image created on March 4, 2023. Everything else in my mind is black. I cannot scream. Utterly helpless and clueless, ancestral feminine wisdom eluding me. I am scared. Thirty-six hours from first cramps to giving birth and becoming a mother. There are other complications: the baby is overdue. The umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. I hear the voices of doctors and nurses, but I long for my mom to hold my hand, to breathe with me as I strain and push the new life out of me.

² Levine, 2015, pp. 26-27; poem created 26-03-2023.

I am afraid to scream.
I put on a brave face.
I contain my fear, my stoic mask in place.
At this moment,

I sense my therapist's gentle hand on my knee, the dainty parrot close to my face. "He might drink your tears," her soft voice reassures me. We stay like this for a while: the therapist holds the space while I sob, deep-seated abandonment and fear slowly slipping away. The rose I see in my mind's eye changes colour, the tears morphing into an eye. It is an image I myself re-rendered a few days ago. Light settles behind my eyes. I take a breath. Ragged at first. The bird nestled in the crook of my neck, delicately nibbles my skin. Slowly, lungfuls of his presence ease me back into balance. I open my eyes.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, March 5). *Longing 4* [Original image re-rendered, re-coloured, background removed].

Re-scripting My Story Through the Story of Sky Woman, Giving Birth to Her Daughter, Baby-Faced Lynx

I woke up to strong labour pains coursing through my back and belly. I was scared for the first time. The labour pains felt like a rope was tied tightly around my waist. I cried out for my mother.

"Mother," I said, "I miss you! I wish you were here with me to help me, and to see your new grandchild come into this new world!"

After the shock of the first labour pains, my sensibilities kicked in. I had seen women give birth in the Sky World, so I knew what I had to do. I squatted over a pile of soft grasses. I made it through each contraction as it came to me, breathing with the pain, counting my breaths. I called out to my mother every once in a while so that she would hear me:

"Mother! Mother! She is coming!"

Then came the final pushes and I could feel the head of my baby come through. There was a loud gushing noise and then she fell into the softness beneath me. (Horn-Miller, 2016,

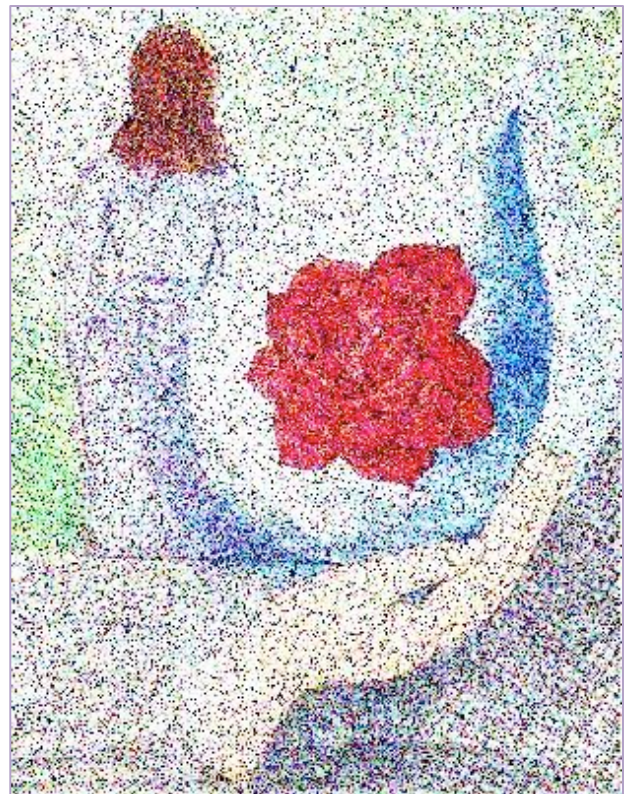
A Letter to my Sixteen-Month-Old Self, Continued

I know mom loves you. But, I also love you on her behalf—her tears unshed, her deep regret speaking in mournful tones, an emotional reminder that growth and change are our birthright. Both you and I now understand. There is no blame. The longing for the absent mother presently is nourishing my love for you, my little one—a happy girl by nature and by name. I currently take you on a healing journey: we travel together, two hearts beating as one.

You are playful and carefree. I have witnessed your delight when flowers blossom under your paintbrush. Our inner Mom is gentle, attentive, encouraging, free to love herself and us, with abandon, unhindered from perennial-old misconceptions about the female body, the vessel that gave birth to you, the vessel that still carries the scars of life full of deep hurt, sadness, and dark-red love. The Love she offered us in other ways that now, as an older woman, I welcome and take in.

“Taking in means becoming intimate with the thing itself—darkness, dismemberment, and death” (Fidyk, 2017, p. 216). Hekate is the inner witness and midwife to this kind of birthing when I relinquish parts of myself that are “ready to die, outmoded attitudes, outgrown roles, whatever elements in [my] life are no longer life-affirming” (Bolen, 2001, p. 47), including psychological defenses and protective habits not now as formerly needed to shield me from Life’s suffering and woundings.

My little one, you can sing, and dance, and skip, and play, and fly because I have your back. Now and forever. My best, most imaginative, and wholesome part. Full of wisdom. I summon you when the longing for the magic of the world is intense. I summon you when making a difficult choice because you are the keeper of my wholeness, before I was born, a constellation of light,



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, March 5). *Longing 3* [Original image re-rendered with Microsoft film grain filter, re-oriented through a horizontal flip].

vibrant, pulsing heart, open to the universe, wide-eyed, receptive, attuned to the beauty within and without—the umbilical cord tying us to the numinous and the sacred. My joyful little girl, love-filled, facing bravely Life amidst the plush verdant meadows, sprinkled with rainbows of flowers. A portal to inner peace and content when our heartbeats synchronize.

You are special. You are beautiful. You are a source of untainted potential, untamed, untapped, archetypal sage, teaching me how to live right in oneness and harmony, fluid and lithe.

Though you get scared, I have you in my heart, thriving in ways you couldn't back then, bodyful (Caldwell, 2018), complete. I can pick you up if you fall. I can wipe your tears when you cry. I welcome you home, the place of belonging and connection to the “good enough” Mother and Self.

Afterword

Coming to beauty and goodness by way of suffering, like coming to consciousness, is a violent event” (Fidyk, 2017, p. 216).

The power of unbidden images cannot be underestimated, for they represent the complexity of our unconscious affective topographies, becoming signposts in a process of re-integration of warded off overwhelming fear and pain, of dissociated parts of our selves. As Sieff (2015) writes, “the traumatizing wounds endure regardless of how much inner work we do, and when something presses against these wounds our pain and fear are likely to remain intense.” But, “we can live with our wounds in healthier ways” (p. 234). This is why the cultivation of an ability to stand simultaneously in two worlds: the present reality and the trauma-world, which is an overpowering emotional realm, characterized by sensations, images, feelings, and thoughts that our fear response to Life generates, is a crucial aspect of trauma healing, so powerlessness, helplessness, hopelessness, unworthiness, inadequacy are no longer filters distorting our ‘windows’ into the internal and external terrains (Sieff, 2015, p. 231).

The story of Sky Woman gifts me an alternative vantage point, opening a breathing space to re\mythifying my personal story, re\store/(y)ing a sense of wellness ruptured at a very young age. It is a re-calibrating mirror affording a new connection to my “inner identity” (Horn-Miller, 2016, p. 14). In conjunction with the wisdom of Hekate, the energy of a woman’s own intuition, which allows her to see “the connection between past, present and future” (Bolen, 2001, p. 46), I am clearing a pathway that, hopefully, will lead to dwelling more often in a place of fullness and wellbeing.

Resmaa Menakem speaks of “five opportunities for healing and making room for growth:” self-healing, communal healing, relational healing with a trusted other, healing with a body-focused or a trauma therapist (2017, p. 305). I am walking all five paths, and the letter to my sixteen-month-old self attests to the necessity for not simply restoring but re\mythifying my core, wounded, and recovering being. Embodying images and stories, rendering them in vivid and evocative forms, changes the body’s metabolizing powers. To use Menakem’s words again, the desire to mend my personal traumas is also an ethical responsibility to myself, to my family, to my son, and through him, to future generations and the rest of the world (2017, p. 306). “To live well, we must take heed. Look deeply into the dark side of Life, its wildness and chaos—and make it conscious” (Fidyk & St. Georges, 2020, p. 94). Indeed, on this trail, I don’t journey alone.

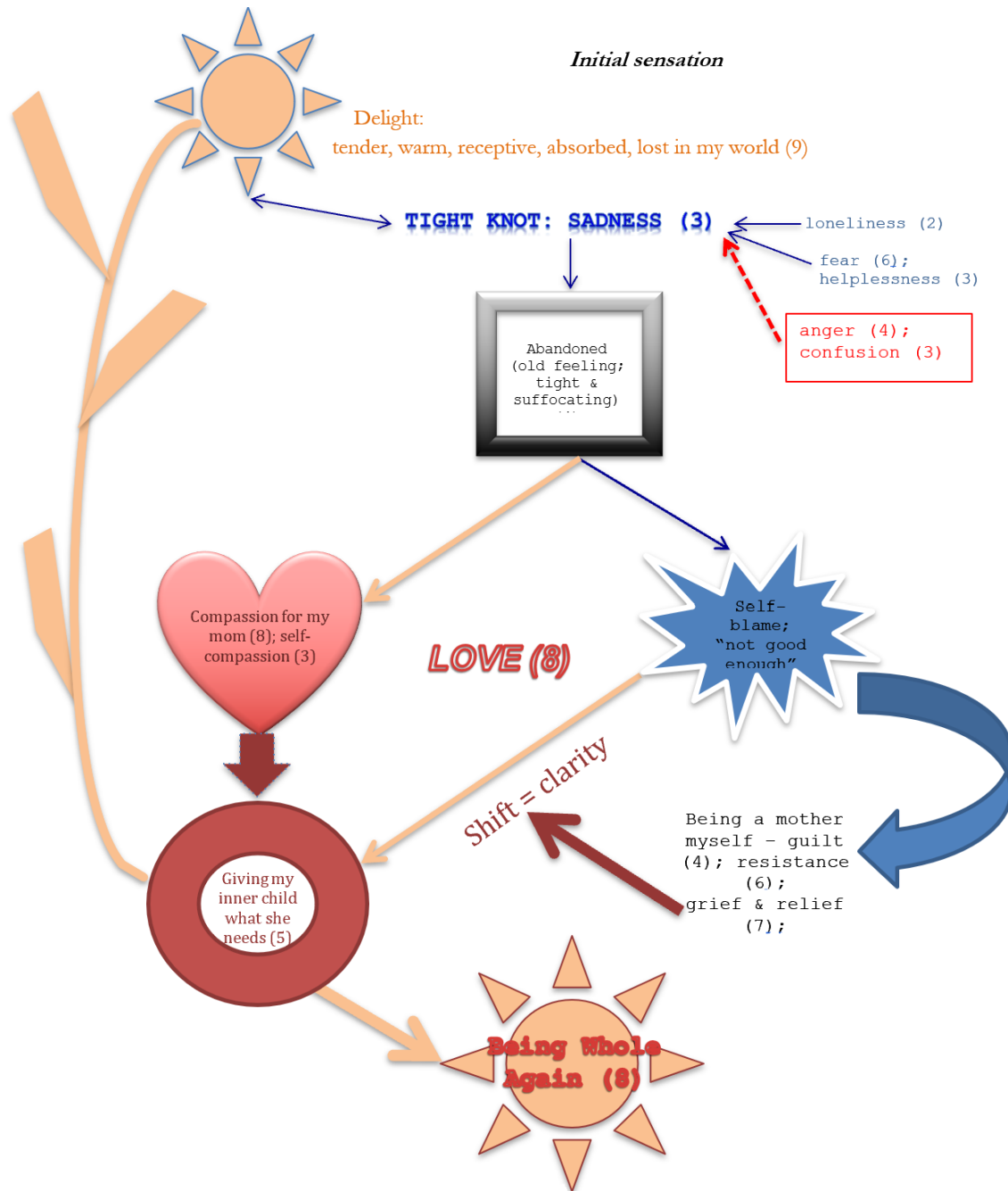
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11 | TOPOGRAPHY OF SENSATIONS

Expressive Landmark 17: April 10, 2023



Re\mythifying my personal story of abandonment:

Reconnecting with the inner child

I wonder: how many mandalas can I destroy and so to start again and create another one, and another one, and so on? (Balinska-Ourdeva, 2023a)

Image 1 (whole): Photograph of me giving a bouquet to Mom.

Image 2 (broken): Re\visioned image, titled *Longing 1*, representing my abandonment trauma, a personal 'origin' myth imprinted on my sixteen-month-old self. On several occasions, mom has shared the anecdote of leaving me in the nursery home, pasted to the fence, and finding me there at the end of the day, crying for her.

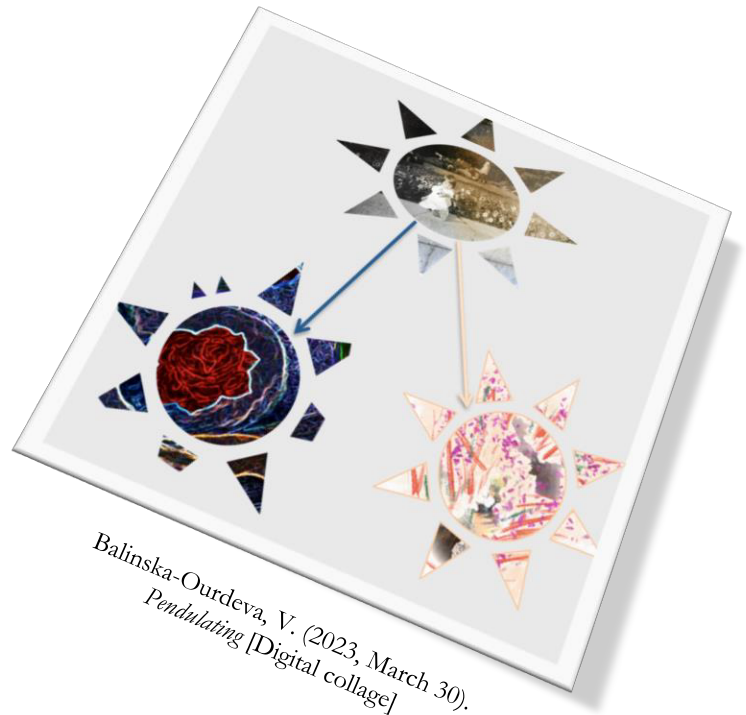


Image 3 (whole):

Re\visioned image, titled *Inner-child's delight*.

Stories both hurt and heal, and the need for re\story/ing of our personal, familial, cultural, and world histories is acute (Balinska-Ourdeva, 2023b).

Many of my art pieces feature flowers, associated with memories of mom taking me to the neighbourhood park on Sundays, of me offering her posies. She is smiling, and I am delighted.

Paradoxical symbols, flowers. Forms or essences evocative of potential, unfurling from a

bud into a flourishing being-ness. Fleeting beauty all the more precious; a reminder of what comes after: ripeness & mortality. “The brevity of life,” “the ephemeral nature of pleasure” (Cirlot, 2001, p. 110). Given at birth to celebrate, also strewn on corpses carried to the final resting place. Delicious scents, fragile petal evanescence, entreating Life’s jubilant effervescence, experiencing the fullness of the Great Round. Soul image—whimsical fecund garden. Pollination, germination, procreation—fruits and seeds

whorl-petals

stamen-autogamy

ovule-incubation

hermaphroditic kernel

union of opposites

drawing, stretching, spinning

my bodymemory

whole—broken—healing—whole—broken—healing—whole

ad finitum

Pendulation (Levine, 2015, pp. 141; 170; 252): holding/\housing in tension paradoxical memories, my inner child is the source of creativity and rapture, the keeper of my wholeness.

Reconnecting with her is healing.

But what do flowers teach me? The language of flowers is the language of letting go. Yet, the strength of petals clinging to the receptacle seems symbolic of the attachments I have, particularly the experience of my mother-being, which is paradoxical. I did not want to be a mother. A stomach cramp across the length of my pelvic floor—tightening, contracting. I shrink to a small dot under the shower, pumping breast milk, tears streaming down. Contraction. Shower splashing. Back pain. Holding my breath. In gasps, the sobs are coming, realizing I don’t want to be a mother, but it is too late. Loud voices, an argument about linens, the piece of cloth my husband washed, my mother washing it again. *ANGER*. The pain returns.

The baby is alone.

I have no energy to pick him up. Lost in an ocean of fear, confusion, wilting myself under the shower, milk streaming, mixed with tears for what has not been yet, my young, strong headed warrior-woman, Athena, forcefully softened. I am pressured to manipulate my body. It is resistant, unyielding because I am not ready to be a mother. The responsibility is

too much, but it is sweet. Red knitted little pants, he is kicking. Tiny legs pounding the air, energetically. It is not about him. It is about my body being used when I don't want to share it. It has not found its proper form, and I am moulded by others' expectations, not my core values—good mother, good wife, good daughter, caught in this circle, I don't know who I am, and so, I please. I please OTHERS.

My son is so helpless: he needs me.

The guilt, the sound of washing, the steam of ironing, cheesecloth made into pampers, the smell of baby urine and poop, so flesh-filled. I cannot find a way out. It is all part of the illusion that this is what I want, but I don't, and making my body accept the change leaves me bereft. I am grieving—not the birth of my son, but the loss of a budding self, of knowing my female power and independence, exploring the desires that stir—mostly the pursuit of personal growth, creative insights, understanding of others' and mine profound humanity, expanding erudition / somatic intelligence, bodyfull wisdom—this is what I will NOT compromise. (*I wonder how my mom felt when she gave birth to me.*)

Варна, Морската градина

azure-soft sea-plush calmness

Varna, the Sea Garden

sitting on a bench
your stroller set aside
your tiny body warm & wriggly
your small hands cupping gently
the sadness in my eyes

around us elms and poplars
aspiring to reach
beyond the sky into a galaxy
of stars

in midday
the sunlit sky showers rays upon us
your light footfall along the path
on grey asphalt

your feet so eager
to toddle down the cord of no right or wrong
the being

of you, an unascertained secret

an open picture book

in front of us
black words printed on white pages, stories weaving
their way into a bond of
many strands

the missing part of me
is your fruit of love
so innocent when cradled
so fragile
a lonely leaf
fastened to my vacant bough
stubbornly attached
to body-soul which I am not yet
ready to discover

I don't know how to be your mother

the books, the stories
we lace together
we cling to the unconscious rhythms
of womb and
amniotic fluid susurrations
truths forged from nine-month-stronghold
in darkness
where blood-sparks irradiate
uncharted pathways of affection

No longer the flower, I am the mother-plant,

shooting roots deep into the soil of my own being.

Free from the metaphorical pistil and umbilical cord that tie me to my mother

and to my child,

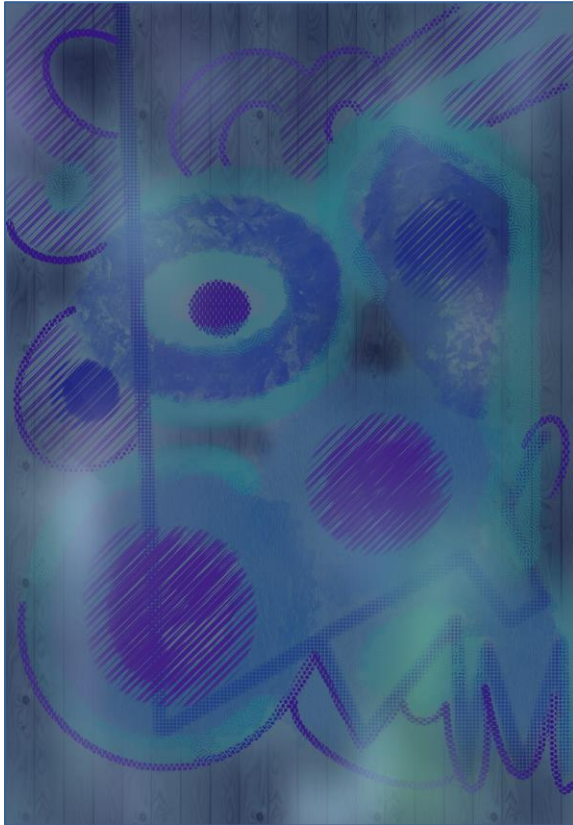
I give birth to my own self.

I learn how to be a good-enough mother to my little one. Self-pollinating. Self-recreating.

Autopoetic.

Expressive Landmark 18: The Eye of Confusion – June 2, 2023

A body part of double symbolism, the eye is either a representation of the third eye, or the Cyclops eye which stands for the primary forces of nature (Cirlot, 2001, p. 75), the base of a person, regressing or being lifted up by most primitive but powerful urges of subhuman or superhuman origin. Cyclops is the offspring of the earth (Gaia) and the sky (Ouranus). Neither human, nor divinity, similarly to the Titans, Cyclopes are predecessors of the celestial inhabitants. Their father locked them in the maternal womb because he feared them. Giant mythical beings of dual nature, their earthy bodies support minds that “[live] in the skies” (Rohmer). They are competent inventors and steadfast personalities, whose single-eyed vision is disconnected from the facts and values of mundane life (it is “a transcendent-oriented vision,” Rohmer). But here is a warning: individuals ignoring the wisdom of their



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, June 2). *The Eye of Confusion* [Digital art]

earthbound, fleshy corpora, focusing exclusively on spiritually or intellectually elevated ‘celestial’ sights could be easily blinded and become single-minded. A monocular vision is limited at best and dangerous at worst (Rohmer).

The eyes are a vital sensory organ in humans, and the belief that truth and beauty lie in the eye of the beholder best exemplifies the eye’s relationship with the sun, the archetypal symbol of knowledge, intelligence, thinking, reason, and understanding. In the English language, “I see” is synonymous with “I understand.” Comprehending depends on sensory input, and among the senses, the eyes for humans are the most significant source of information about the world. Giving priority

to the eyes, however, refocuses attention to the external environment, not on what is inside. So, in-sight vision is like a Cyclops eye: in the darkness of the cave, it offers a tunnel

foresight illuminating the way, but not beyond its margins. Confusion is the emotion keeping our inner vision sharp and alert because it warns us about the resources we have and whether our capacity to handle the obstacle on our way is worth the effort or not. Confusion is about knowing our cognitive limitations: the constraints of reasoning and logic, and our striving for knowing the truth in its fullness. Confusion is the crossroads where we have to wait for intuition to produce the right solution; otherwise, our actions might be futile (Vazard & Audrin, 2022).

Heterotopic eyes, which have been transferred to different parts of the body, are symbolic of clairvoyance (Cirlot, 2001, p. 100), or the ability to perceive through space and time (Radin, 2021, 00:18:17). Many eyes carry the ambivalent symbolism of night and stars, on one hand, but also of darkness and inability to see clearly. The many eyes could be suggesting a psychic disintegration. Defined as a segmentation or falling apart of psychological structures, the state is treated as a mental disorder because it leads to abnormal changes in behavioural functions (APA Dictionary). Jung considers the eye to be a representation of the maternal bosom (Cirlot, 2001, pp. 100-101), again an archetypal image representative of the connection one forms with the mother as the primary caregiver. Therefore, the image possibly expresses an anticipated or foreseeable dissolution of psychic structures that have shaped my behaviour since my earliest years. Perhaps, one of the fears of abandonment has instigated as protective defenses to shield the inner child and keep her intact at the heart of my being.

Considered from another perspective, psychic disintegration is a re-organization of psychological structures in the process of individuation or reinvention of self, not necessarily pathological if the unconsciously lived defensive mechanisms are brought to consciousness. Cirlot again helps me to connect the dots and interpret the symbolism of the many eyes in my image: the need to look closely at my entanglement with my mother and with my son, blurred boundaries leading to emotional enmeshment. The Cyclops or the third eye can provide me with a perspective to look at the unconscious ancestral lineage and to discern what has been repressed, forgotten, or unacknowledged (Cirlot, 2001, p. 98).

The state of confusion is a two-fold experience: on one hand, a portal to new learning opens, the stirrings of curiosity and the sparks of inquisitiveness motivating it. On the other, confusion is an entry way to frustration, and that is when I become stuck: feelings of helplessness and powerlessness arise in the face of outcomes I did not expect since these

were beyond my capacity to solve. I live in this space of not-knowing, my mind blank and raw, the intensity of the desire to get out of the situation constantly growing. Will I be discouraged or will I triumph? All seems so incongruous! I don't need to be a clairvoyant to see the hard times I am facing because of my ailing body, and the fear of my inadequate coping with the difficulties fuels misperception, doubt, and perplexity about a welcomed but scary transformation. The changes—physical, emotional, and spiritual—are all new and complex. They are tricky to understand. Perhaps, I may have to experience the boundaries of what is currently my inner landscape before attempting to comprehend what is beyond my line of sight. In-sight but past my field of vision. The eye of confusion could grant me the competence to deal with the problems a tunnel vision might produce. I don't want a tunnel vision. I want the horizon to open as the third eye awakens through careful and painstakingly slow unravelling of my inner life and the movements of the soul. Attunement to body and the cosmic rhythms.

Philosophically, the shift in perspective the eyes in my image represent is possibly the gradual dismantling of a purely (classical) materialist view of the world. I have been immersing myself in readings that clearly challenge many of my beliefs about what the universe is and how it operates. But more importantly, I have been fascinated with the phenomenon of consciousness, being particularly drawn to quantum explanations of it, which border on esoteric or mystical. I have not established a firm understanding of any particular theory or approach, waiting for ideas and beliefs to crystalize as I continue to expand my knowledge. What I know for sure is that I have started questioning fundamental assumptions I have held dear, and sorting out, keeping and enhancing beliefs most resonant with a felt ontological sense that a chain of particular personal experiences with parallel and multiple realities (Linklater, 2014, pp. 147-150) tell me are true. The shift might be so radical, it would amount to a 'cataclysmic event' resulting in psychic disintegration, which I have experienced on three separate occasions: in 1996, 2012, and 2014, but only as a precursor to a psychic re-integration, hopefully, in a process of self-discovery conducive of a more extensive understanding of myself, other beings, reality, and Life.

The spontaneous image I drew on June 2, 2023 also includes semicircles and wood. According to Cirlot (2001), a semicircle represents the law of equilibrium, the balance between night and day (p. 183), the balance between mutually exclusive but complementary opposites. My ambivalent attachment is a constant oscillation between 'should I stay' or

‘should I go,’ ‘should I trust’ or ‘should I not.’ Getting closer is a longing for living in connection with self and other, deep-seated and profound. Yet, the fear of abandonment is a perpetual instigator of actions separating me from my being. And in this rocky motion, I incessantly seek balance. As a mother-symbol (Cirlot, 2001, p. 376), the wood in my image stands for my backstory, carved from memories of my becoming. Contrary to metal, wood is less sturdy and more susceptible to damage, but its warm solidity combines flexibility with resistance, durability with a quick temper if fire catches it, as it burns easily. However, wood is a versatile material, and those who work with it know well that its inherent nature must be respected if the wood is to yield durable, beautiful, solid, and smooth utilitarian objects.

The circular shapes in the image remind me of tree rings, formed during growth as the new cells multiply under the bark and gradually, with seasonal changes, expand the tree trunk. And so, the wood in the image is the backdrop of my initial growth that set the development of branches intergrown with the trunk. In sawn wood, branches give rise to knots: memories that make up the primary scenario of my self-formation, that is, the history of my earliest emotional responses stored in the cells, tissues, muscles, and bones of my body (Balinska-Ourdeva, 2019). The background wooden wall is the “self-care system” (Kalsched, 2003, p. 154) and its protective/persecuting aspects. In short, the image represents multiple internal conflicts I am experiencing as I look more closely at the constitutive narratives of my current identity: the split, rejected or unrecognized parts and those I have consciously accepted. Kalsched (2003) explains: “infantile need and fragile vulnerability exist side by side with tyrannical rage” (p. 155). My innocent, vulnerable, neglected inner child and the inner Saboteur in its various guises.

The relationship with my mom is fundamental to my worldview. Here, confusion is the resulting state of not knowing what to keep and what to relinquish from the past, represented also through the eyes. As I ponder the image, it seems as if I am seeking clarity for various issues without understanding the deep roots they have in lives before the one I presently live. The mixing of signals—intuition, sensation, feeling, and reason—is both a goal and a way to achieve equilibrium and to settle into knowing of what is mine and what is my mother’s. But more importantly, as Rohmer extolls, the Cyclops vision is

a warning to anyone aspiring to cultivate their symbolic intuition; to those striving hard to open their third eye. The Cyclops provides an eerie illustration of what can happen when this eye is opened too hastily and without the proper guidance.

Straining to open wide their third eye, to the point where this becomes entirely round (that is, cyclopean), some unfortunate seekers end up losing their native, dual perspectival vision.

Being able to see simultaneously an individual tree and the entire forest is a skill. Lao Tzu, in his famous *Tao Te Ching* philosophical poem, suggests that attunement to the *tao*, which I interpret at the cosmic creative Life force, and becoming one with it, requires a multi-perspectival inner vision. Underlining cosmological insight is the belief that Life is a flux, a ceaseless flow of ingenious transformations taking place in a time-space continuum without beginning and end. No origin point, no source of order, but “infinite worlds” (Lao Tzu, 2006, ch. 6) all manifesting within a unified energy field. The relationships of events, their bleeding into each other makes for porous, fluid boundaries between ‘things’ or experiences, their integrity equalling the prospect of becoming a whole, an entity of its own while connected to all that has preceded and will follow it, both “persistence and spontaneous emergence of novelty” (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 27/303). The image is a reminder that I need to thread carefully and with vigilance to prevent losing my “native, dual perspectival vision” (Rohmer).

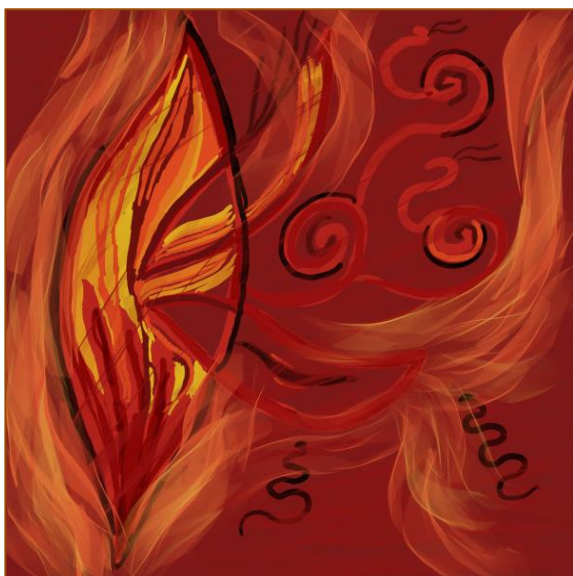
The eye of confusion invites me to look for alternative approaches to the problems I face. Currently, many of the solutions are not in my hands, so the confusion about what my body is undergoing cannot be an effective motivation to act. I depend on others to help me find out what my body needs to get back to health, homeostasis restored. Thus, the eye of confusion turns into frustration. I sit in this state, directing my ability to see, understand, and know within, cultivating the inner sight and transcendent vision.

Lastly, the eye of confusion means I trust the intimacy I can develop with my self. Knowing what is in my control and what is not requires alignment with the forces that shape me and which I am shaping, making the most of the possibilities any given situation bestows. Knowing is feeling. Feeling into my inner child and my mother-being, I discover the Mother within me, not just a reproduced biological matter, but an archetypal, originating, receiving and receptive creative principle which is part of the cosmic Life force: the cycle of birth, growth, aging, and death.

Confusion is chaotic. How I make sense of the process of becoming is through the clarity of paradox: “the weakness becomes strength when what is inflexible becomes supple” (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 46/303).

Expressive Landmark 19: Angry Хала/Баба Яга – June 3, 2023

The dragon and snake are related; a fabulous, mythical animal, the hero either conquers the dragon and makes him a servant, or kills him. The dragon represents prime



matter in the alchemical hierarchy, but in Chinese mythology, it is one of the benevolent animals (Cirlot, 2001, p. 12); in connection to my experience, the image of the dragon is a primal, potent energy preceding any conscious distinctions between rational and irrational actions: it rises from the depths and begs for a makeover.

Otherwise, it could lead to soul-shrinkage, overpowering all good intentions in using the angry affect as an opening to explore a perceived or real threat to the unconscious

foundational values and beliefs underpinning my worldview. The dragon's shape together with the intense red-orange-yellow-black colours in the image represent the potency of this emotion held in my body. My anger is a protective instinct warning me that something feels unsafe but also not allowing me to spiritually bypass it: not letting it go or avoiding the shadow work my sensations and emotional charge require to unpack their meaning. So, what my anger tells me because of its intensity is that an old rejection trauma has sneaked back into consciousness. Both in my personal and professional life, it brings back unbridled



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, June 3). *Angry Хала/Баба Яга* [Digital art, original image above re-rendered]

feelings of fear and rage to which I have not previously responded but shoved them under the rug. This time, however, I know how to exit through the door of action, and the anger is quelled. Temporarily.

The origin of the noun “dragon,” from the Greek word meaning “seeing” (Cirlot, 2001, p. 87), adds to my understanding of anger as a protective force. Even though an imaginary creature, the dragon is “strong and vigilant.” With exceptionally keen eyesight, the mythical being is the guardian of temples (sacred places, just like my worldview and the foundational grid of beliefs and values upon which my identity and personality rest) and treasures (my spiritual and ethical integrity, perhaps?). “[The dragon has been] turned into an allegory of prophecy and wisdom” (Cirlot, 2001, p. 87). But taming the raging dragon is a sign of mastering and sublimating the troubling forces feeding the shadow, and turning them into a benign energy informing an appropriate response to the fear of psychic disintegration.

Perhaps, it is no coincidence that the Vancouver Children’s Hospital in British Columbia has developed a creative approach for treating children’s anxiety called *Taming worry dragons* (Kelty Mental Health). Again, taking a broader psychosomatic perspective, the untamed dragon of my anger, archetypally associated with fire and boiling passion, could be representing the primordial anxiety mobilized in order to survive, a “proto-image” (Kalsched, 2003, p. 147) organizing my earliest experiences of broken containment and holding. I notice the involuntary choice of a square digital canvas. I also notice the female head, which I recognize as Baba Yaga, after rotating the image 90° to the left and flipping it vertically. Baba Yaga is another ambivalent archetype, widely known in Slavic folklore, a potent mytheme with rich symbolism. The associations most strongly resonating with me are of the dark feminine, as the image reveals a connection between two unconsciously related energies in my shadow world: the dragon and Baba Yaga. One has appeared before, the She-dragon, known in Bulgarian folklore as *Lamia* or *Hala*, and in various guises has been suggestive of the destructive potencies present in my being. Baba Yaga and the She-dragon in my art works represent the ravaging powers of the dark feminine we fear. We have difficulty understanding the Great Mystery of which they are manifestations even though without this knowledge—the knowledge of pain, dismemberment, decay, and death—there is no way to experience wholeness.

Because of my current health issues, it seems my “I,” or ego-oriented conscious self, is offered up to the unconscious by a “kind of involuntary death of [my] psychic comfort,

rightness, and rationality” (Feather, 2013, p. 336) in a healing process that hopefully will lead to psychic restructuring and fullness. But, the re-mythifying of my personal abandonment narrative requires re-interpretation of the disquieting feminine energies the image represents. To help me re-vision and alter the perspective, preserving a non-dual awareness of the implications, I turn to feminist explanations of Baba Yaga and anger.

Baba Yaga and the She-dragon, personally speaking, are expressions of dissenting dispositions that have been stowed away for too long because I have bought into the ideals of femininity supplied by my culture of origin and the mainstream Western culture I have come to know through exposure to predominantly North American and Canadian popular texts in all modalities: from internet photographs to advertisements for cosmetic products. Both mythological personae are the opposite of what Zeman & Zeman call “a *romanticized* old age” (2014, p. 242; author’s italics). Anger that fuels rejection of straightjacketing social expectations is at my Baba Yaga’s heart. Therefore, she is my own coming into living awareness of what I have slighted in myself, or what I currently struggle to rebel against: the suppression of my “vital needs, personality, wishes, talents, independence, and freedom” (Zeman & Zeman, 2014, p. 243).

Unlike in the past, the event inspiring the *Anger* image led to a civil but open confrontation and disagreement with younger, nonetheless more powerfully positioned individuals, who worked against my needs, wants, wishes, and talents, an unconscious ageism informing their decisions. I spoke (the tongue in the picture) and shared my truth, what my view on the situation was, and offered a solution. Even though my opinion was dismissed, I am now calmer. Maybe not as serene as completely balancing the scales of ‘light and heavy’ but definitely a lot kinder than when the flaming dragon of anger first reared its head. “[T]he searing flame” of my anger illuminated a more compassionate and benevolent, robust assertiveness that “cut through layers of deception and conditioning” (Barrows as cited in Keefe, 2019, p. 73). Out of the fiery nature of the intense angry fire, self-compassion was born, and with that, a “wellspring of strong energy” (Keefe, 2019, p. 73) for a wanted personal growth because I was able to get to the roots of my anger and understand how I can relate to it in a healthy way. Through the process of painting my angry impulse, I also grew in self-knowledge, for as Keefe insists, dealing with anger effectively, without denying its hold on one but letting it burn with its eruptive power, feeling it to the dregs, is “spiritual work of ... owning oneself” (2019, p. 74). Compassion for self is the source of compassion

for others. So, the image's amplification I end with the realization that taming the fire of the She-dragon, rather than killing her, may bring me the golden apple of discernment, self-knowledge, and transformation. Baba Yaga in me, then, speaks loudly for what is true, a self-sufficient crone, who never feels like a victim. Quite the contrary, she is feared, and though demonized in Slavic folklore, she is respected as a liminal figure, a manifestation of the "Old Wild Mother" and "fearsome Wild Goddess" (Estés, 1995, p. 84; p. 87): a powerful woman benefactor and one who as easily could destroy if her demands are not met. She is an epitome of the wholesome womanhood wisdom I have come to embrace and began to heed.

Another strand in my mythological heritage is Medea's story, a pattern reflective of distressing feelings my body has also stored: from loss of country and family of origin to betrayal that incensed me, wanting revenge on those who hurt me. Medea is one more archetypal figure showcasing the ruinous aspects of female anger and wrath. A unifying semantic thread, as flimsy as it may be, is the image of the dragon, for Medea, after killing her two sons, leaves Corinth in a chariot, drawn by two dragons she received from her grandfather, the sun god Helios (Hooper, 2021, p. 214; Laufer, 2021, p. 236). The myth tells of powerful forces at play in the lives of women who have been traumatized by "love, passion, loss, betrayal, and death" (Hooper, 2021, p. 215). Perhaps, my anger is the chaotic-chthonic force below the façade of the "good daughter," "good wife," and "good mother," which I come up against in most of my writings so far, an identity patriarchal values and expectations have moulded into a presentable, socially respectable persona, clothing my "I" for the past half a century.

What most attracts me to Medea and other manifestations of the dark feminine is the refusal to be a victim. For far too long have I reeled in the pain and hurt, without release of the corticosteroids that fuel a fight response, swallowing the grief, fury, and hostility offenses to my being have engendered. The gratitude I feel now, after discovering the vehemence of my anger, is the reunion with exiled parts of myself: Julietta, the trickster-lover female persona; the Warrior-queen (as my closest friend named her); Baba Yaga and her flipped image, the She-dragon; and the She-wolf. All these energies stem from the same source: the need to recognize my disowned aspirations and passions and the archetypal rage, which nourishes when contained but destroys when left unattended. What my anger nurtures is a deeper sense of self because the entire spectrum of emotions and instincts—both the creative and the destructive—are honoured and given voice in bodily sensations, befriended

inner figures, and symbolical representations that carry the energies outward, returning chaos to order, blindness to clarity and understanding, indignation to self-compassion. The difference between living the archetypal energy of Medea concretely rather than living it symbolically is a fine line (Smith-Hanssen, 2009, p. 173), differentiating a real enactment of the myth through an actual murder from a metaphorical slaying of overdeveloped intellectual ambitions that leave a woman close to the sun but unaware of the undercurrents her fears and vulnerability constantly trigger.

The question, however, remains: “How does an individual survive an onslaught of Medea rage without either acting it out or repressing images and a journey that are needed for healing and individuation?” (Hooper, 2021, p. 220). The unbidden *Anger* representation and the symbols of the She-dragon and Baba Yaga allow for the integration of shadowy qualities in recognition of the powers they carry. Uniting *logos* and *mythos*, the image points to a release of tension otherwise inexorably refused and stifled only to become more powerful with each new instance of re-traumatization. Because anger is an archetypal emotion, it requires awareness and respect, which my traditional upbringing does not allow. So, the symbolic expression wards off, or rather sublimates, the energy of the wrathful Great Mother goddess instead of letting it possess and consume me. The promise of transmutation is there in the fierce-fiery colours, the snaking tongue, and bulging eyes. Profound and long-lasting healing is within the She-dragon’s sight, guarding my anger’s buried treasures once metabolized and tamed so that neither the “I” nor the inner child are emotionally hijacked when Life throws its next curve ball at me.

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12 | BUTTERFLY DANCE

Expressive Landmark 20: The Butterfly Dance – June 2, 2023

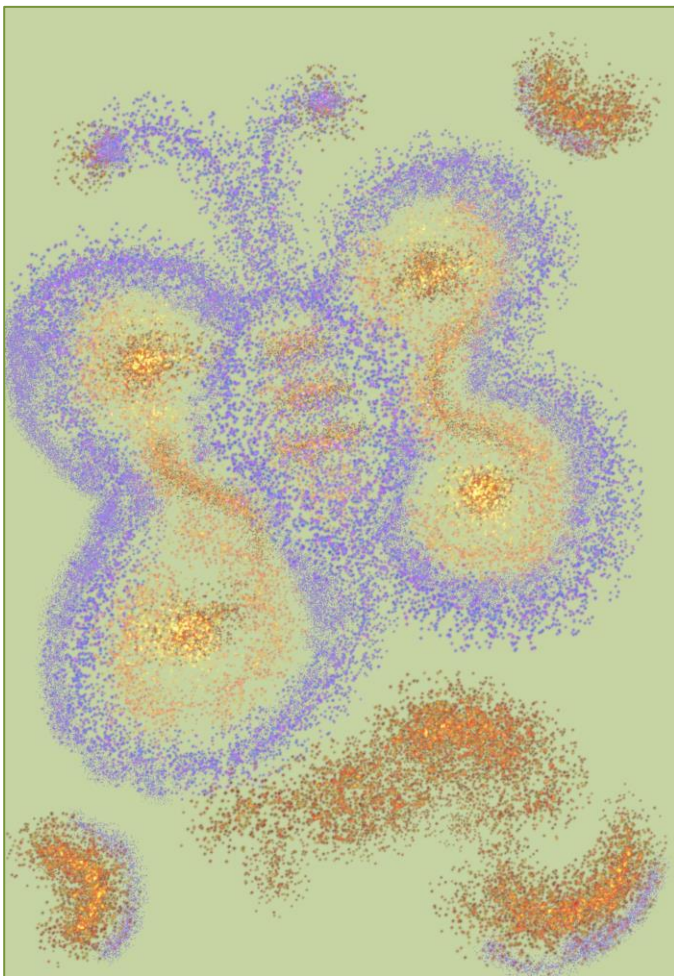
“Mystery and magic means there is place for hope.” (Cote)

A fluttery sensation in my stomach, faint and squirmy but nonetheless unpleasant, agitates me this morning. I draw it outwardly, and the butterfly image unnerves me. Anxiety claims my emotional landscape, bleeding insistently over the peaceful pale sage background. Despite the glitter, the insect somatically incites a jittery, twitchy-twirling worry of unknown origin.

A troubled feeling also grabs my heart as I think about the trip to Bulgaria in a month. To carry a house on my back across continents is a wise advice, but I am not sure

how to follow it. Making comfortable with the fear that my sciatica will be aggravated, doubts abound. Butterfly and snail are guiding symbols as I enter my birth family’s emotional field once more, after so many years of being away.

The snail in the *Summer Glitter* image initially I did not notice. Yet, he is a soothing presence to amplify: while the butterfly may flap her wings in the weird but adept way she does, careless about the effects her actions produce, the snail is deliberate in his choices when and what to reveal. The snail brings his home with him wherever he goes. Unhurried and determined, the snail is a sign to slow down and stay with the fears flooding my body even with my mistrust of



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, June 2). *Summer Glitter* [Digital art]

intuition and instincts. Living mindfully in the moment invites an intimate awareness of the minute-to-minute subtle movements of the bodymind but also a distance. Maybe this is what

the trip will gift me: a distance from the house I live in and a consequent detachment from the context where my relationships have unfolded for the past twenty-nine years. But I can carry home with me, just like the snail, because “home is where the heart is,” as the saying goes. There will be space between my husband and I once we get to Bulgaria. And, I am hungry to explore what being apart would unveil.

June 18, 2023

Butterflies have always been joyful sights; their lightness and flutter remind me of the delicate fragility of Life lived in anticipation of change. The butterfly effect is what comes to mind: minute localized disturbances causing immense chaotic (unpredictable) effects. So, instead of being a representation of hope, a butterfly is about the deceptive insignificance of past and present choices I have made, tracing their seemingly random consequences. The glitter is about sparkly appearances, their iridescent glamour—taunting. A butterfly primarily symbolizes metamorphosis. Perhaps, the image speaks to changes currently in the making of which I am unaware. Will I welcome them, or will they bring more suffering? What is subtly swirling that will result in immense and surprising repercussions?

The glitter in this image is both a sacred connection to joy, child-like amazement, and shimmering femininity (the image of Tinker Bell so clearly etched in my mind, for my husband often sends me the fairy emoji when texting) but also an obvious reminder of a fake reality. What role have fantasy and idealization played in my marital choices to shape a relationship that both disappoints and promises new potentialities? I wonder. Tinker Bell, the fairy, is so small she is able to hold only one feeling at a time. Hence, her sweeping emotional extremes (Wikipedia contributors). Perhaps, my husband sees me as a Tinker Bell, my intense emotions too extreme. Does he fear them? My answer is ‘Yes.’

Tinker Bell is not the princess I wanted to be as a child. Her graceful wings are not the support that lifted up my hope of domestic happiness. It emerged from a propitious self-taught dance, an expression of my ambivalent attachment style. The butterfly dance of closeness and distance in my conjugal union, a blueprint the earliest relationships in my family of origin have laid.

The flight of a butterfly is a puzzling motion. She contracts her body, making a slanted figure eight pattern while clapping her wings. Contracting, slanting, figure eight

pattern resonate with me, each one revealing a body-speak I cannot say I have fully deciphered but all three having something to do with the influences my husband and son have had on my self-discovery and self-actualization. These certainly beg further examination.

June 23, 2023

The *Summer Glitter* image was an attempt to calm myself. Sciatica pain, for the past three weeks, has been constantly zapping. I know something is wrong with the protruding disc because I feel the pins-and-needles in my back and down my right thigh. The numbness travels to the left side and the left heel, sliding down to the big toe and the foot's inner side. Wollyn's warning, "on a physical level, a rejection of our parents [feels] as a pain, tightness, or numbness in our body" (2016, p. 59/241) rings in my head. Crisscrossing my lower limbs, the numbness is another invitation to unravel family secrets and relationship dynamics. I start with what is closest to home: How has my marriage fostered and hindered my personal growth?

December 31, 2023

Butterflies in classical Greek and Roman art and literature hold Janus-faced symbolism (Blanco, 2013, p. 5). It is a well-known fact that the ancient Greek word for "soul" and "butterfly" is the same, *psyche*, from which derive the names for the Western scientific disciplines concerned with the bodymind health: psychology, literally meaning, "psyche's logos" (I am playing on words rather than offering an accurate translation), and psychiatry, the branch of Western medicine dealing with the diagnosis and treatment of mental disturbances and illnesses. The butterfly image my unconscious intuitively produced foreshadows an unpredictable and uncertain stage in my Life where the dance I perform, in my physical form, in my psychic unfolding, and in the entirety of my being, is an oscillation and finding balance between opposite outcomes. A symbol of health and of illness, the butterfly is both a coveted and a feared entity appearing as a premonition of psychosomatic advances precariously bringing me to the precipice of Life and in direct encounter with Death: bodymind stiffening, lack of physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual nurturing, a state of complete stasis and encasement in the chrysalis phase. Death giving birth to Life

once the adult butterfly breaks out of the cocoon. The mysterious metamorphosis is so weighty, the margins between Life and Death impossibly irreconcilable yet profoundly interdependent.

The butterfly in my image has spread her wings, the clapping motion propelling her into the air about to occur. According to a study of the butterfly's flying mechanism, the insect's down stroke is weight supporting. Her flexible annexes, unlike rigid wings, increase the impulse and clap of the insect, accounting for the efficiency of her wing-beats. I want to muse about the butterfly's take-off, the moment she lifts up from a resting position, exerting a powerful, fast, and directed effort and exquisite control over her body as her wings cupping-clap upward. The two separate motions: up stroke and down stroke fulfill different functions, one providing the thrust, the other—the lift (Johansson & Henningsson, 2021), their rhythmic alteration hurling the insect into flight. Applied to my attempts to 'lift up' my being, generating hope and optimism about the future to thrust me into an unknown fate, the butterfly's motion and its aerodynamic sophistication remind me that my descent (down stroke) could support me when I take up, while the ascent (up stroke) is what drives me forward, in an erratic flight helping me to evade metaphorical predators.

Who or what are the metaphorical predators threatening my wellbeing? I begin with a semi-conscious nostalgia, releasing locked-up memories about the fairylike love I felt as a young woman.

I met my husband in the third year of university studies, in August of 1987. I liked his mature looks: he definitely stood out among the rest of the male physics students on my team during the mandatory fall harvesting camp in Lovech, a small city in North western Bulgaria. We worked at a canning factory, helping to make peach, apple, and plum juice from the annual fruit harvest. My husband often would ask for the night shift, revealing early on in our acquaintance he was a night owl. We had long conversations, but I did not immediately fall in love with him. In fact, it was months after the end of the agricultural labour camp when we met again in front of a grocery store I regularly passed by on my way to the trolleybus stop when I went to downtown Sofia. And so, our love story began with a chance encounter and a gradual growth of affection and attachment. Distance, literal and figurative, has played a significant role in our life together on more than one occasion.

During the nine months of courtship before we married, I slowly became more and more fascinated with my husband's mind, his perseverance, self-discipline, strong will, and

resolve. He is a reliable man, whose inner strength I admire to this day. But, these qualities later became also a source of frustration. What I remember of these first months of unfurling love was the charm of his appearance: salt and pepper hair at the age of twenty-eight. My friends envied me because he looked sophisticated and grown-up, a strong masculine sexual appeal in his countenance. Tall and muscular, he was exuding erudition and confidence I found extremely attractive. I was fully aware my husband was the total opposite of my father, and this was one reason for my powerful attraction to him. The more Eros claimed me, the more I respected and went into raptures about everything that made my spouse different from my parent. And here was the first seed of future disappointments because my attraction and attachment to my husband were products of idealization. Though it is normal in romantic relationships to project desired qualities onto the person one becomes enamoured with, in my case the unconscious fantasy was also a shield against the deep-seated fear of abandonment because of the emotionally tense family of origin dynamics and conscious rejection of my parents and what they stood for.

Most prominently, the incongruence showed up when my husband proposed. My parents' response was baffling, for neither of them accepted my choice. It was my grandfather who welcomed my husband into our family, appreciating his strong personality and his love for me. Now, as I think back on my family history, I understand why my grandfather responded with kindness to a stranger coming suddenly into our country house asking for his granddaughter's hand in marriage. My grandpa had done exactly the same thing: without warning, he had popped up at the door of my grandmother's place, surprising her and her family with his proposal. From my grandfather's perspective, the situation was replaying in the same house where his love and marital journey had started.

I wedded against my profound desire to have a common law partnership rather than an orthodox marriage. To appease my parents after discovering I was pregnant, I agreed to tie the knot. When I miscarried, more anxiety and frustration strained the relationship with them, but the love for my spouse grew since he was unwaveringly a source of comfort, emotional support, and hope.

As a young woman, in the midst of exploring and enjoying my independent, determined, and indomitable, Warrior-queen budding self, I did not want to be a wife. What I wanted at the time was to finish university and to become a scholar, spending days in the library while researching materials for my master's thesis. Though I did not dream of pursuing a Ph.D., academic work appealed to me, and I wanted to pursue a career that let me play with ideas and theories, enticed me to research and study, to accumulate more knowledge and mental agility. Also, I wanted a profession that would allow me to utilize my strong sense of justice and advocate for women's equality.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (1988, November 12). *My Wedding* [Photograph]

The amazing intellectually rich and stimulating conversations my husband and I have always had are the fibres that make our bond. This foundation was laid in the Bulgarian National Library, which became a frequent dating place where we would meet and spend hours, mutually enraptured by our discussions of books we have read, films we have seen, ideas we were fascinated with. The topics of our conversations ranged widely, which is another reason I fell in love with my spouse: his acumen, his thirst for learning, his beautiful logical brain, his illuminating insights and ability to see things from unexpected angles. A brilliant mind I couldn't get enough of because I

wanted to be smart and erudite. I wanted to be his intellectual equal.

My body expands and joy floods in as I write about the nine months when we were dating. I would say this was probably a time when I felt attuned to an inner sense of wellbeing and an optimism about the future because I appreciated the way I was personally growing, my husband being fully supportive, and even challenging me to strive for more, to become more than I myself imagined. The trajectory of uplift continued throughout the first

years of our marriage and even later on while the illusion of seeing my husband as my soul mate lasted. But my butterfly dance, its whimsical wonder, was erratic. Periods of closeness alternating with periods of withdrawal and literal distance, the complexity of my evolving slant figure eight attachment patterns to this day hard to comprehend. Three pivotal moments stand out as the causes of family discord that, from my perspective, created anxious tensions in our love life and marriage.

Why do I use the slant and seemingly inconsistent butterfly flight to symbolize the ambivalent attachment pattern I have shown in many of my relationships, offering a personal example to the popular in current psychological studies belief that “those who are insecure in their early attachment behave more erratically with more confusion about trust, safety, and regulation of distance between self and other” (Wrye, 2006, p. 728)?

The word “slant” refers to a sideways motion, veering from a straight line at a particular angle. Giving birth to my son and the disagreement about naming him, even though my husband and I did not directly confront each other, mark the very first oblique movement in my husband’s and my idealizations. Subsequent projections of an unconscious impression that I was to be treated as the princess he rescued from her unappreciative family, an ideation my husband has shared on several occasions, wielded invisible stress on our union. Unknowingly, I had lived to his expectations because I also naively wanted to be the princess happily married ever after. “People around us want us to be certain way *for their own sake*,” writes Harriet Lerner in her book *The Dance of Intimacy* (2002, p. 21; author’s italics), and this is what happened to me. I accepted the need to adjust, hiding those parts of me that made me unhappy in my marriage. I opted for compromise, naming my son after my mother-in-law, which in retrospect is a move I am proud of because, in a lemniscate bond, it ensured the perpetuity of my love for my husband. It brought us closer together, allowing for the energy between us to flow, my unique identity not fully surrendered to the wishes, needs, and expectations of my partner. I felt safe in my own loop while also appreciating the harmony of our mutual connection (Heider-Rauter, 2018, p. 8).

The second crack in my idealization of my husband and our relationship occurred in 1996 because of my initial experience with alternate and multiple realities (Linklater, 2014, pp. 147-150). My husband was scared. I have never seen him cry, but the night when he made the decision to take me to the emergency room, I remember him tearing. At that time, we had just started living together again after being apart for more than a year. When in 1994 he

transferred from the University of Natal in Durban, South Africa to the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, Canada to pursue a Ph.D. in theoretical physics, I stayed in Bulgaria because I could not obtain a student visa right away. My immigration in 1995 was both desired and loathed; the trauma of displacement and separation, leaving our son behind, created subterranean pressures on our marriage. We were finding our way back to a balanced pattern of co-habitation, but a disagreement about where our child would live while both his parents built a new life abroad, impalpably plagued our relationship. I downplayed the significant emotional impact of such an enormous transition, erratically moving between pushing away and clinging, distrusting my husband's love and feeling insecure about who I was. Despite the disappointments, which I projected onto our relationship, I kept alive the blissful conviction that my husband was the "magical Other" (Hollis, 1998, p. 36) and continued to expect his validation and reassurance, little by little eroding my already fragile sense of self. Unwittingly, tensions and anxieties afflicting our birth families were absorbed in our marriage despite the geographical expanse. I wish I had known back then what I now know: "the amount of self [one brings] into an important relationship" is a vital factor in the management of conflict and distance. "To the extent that we have not carved out a clear and whole 'I' in our first family, we will always feel in some danger of being swallowed up by the 'togetherness force' with others" (Lerner, 2002, p. 53).

I yielded to the pressure, and while attempting to preserve the marriage, I sacrificed myself. The horizontal figure eight, in its sideways shape, symbolically renders the equilibrium of dualities, the resentment and hope I simultaneously harboured while pondering my actions in the summer of 1996, for at that time, I was considering a divorce. This is also the year we brought our son to Canada, closing our family circle and completely detaching from our extended families.

According to Cirlot (2001), the figure eight is both "interlacing and knotted," emphasizing the relationship of the infinity symbol with the concept of "binding and fettering—a concept that is generally expressive of unchanging psychic situation" (p. 172). The symbol of infinity and eternal love is a type of knot, and as such, it bears the enchanting associations of connection, which relate to safety, protection, and enfolding. However, in my marriage the knot is also representative of a consistent pattern of constriction, reticence, emotional distance, and finding fault with myself when things got sour between my husband and I. I stopped speaking my mind, avoiding conflict, and prioritizing his and my son's needs

over my own. The lemniscate knot turned into a Gordian knot, which I did not cut in order to find the center, my self.

The last but not least occasion of rupture in my conjugal existence fully materialized the unconscious fear of abandonment and rejection as I experienced my husband's infidelity in an excruciatingly painful way. Recollecting the details of that period is still deeply hurtful, and though I have forgiven him and myself for the mutual anguish we caused, the erratic butterfly dance of our relationship remains delicate and winding. Shifting between the nostalgia for the old days of projected "Eden" (Hollis, 1998) and the hope for new beginnings as our companionship continues to grow, I am looking for opportunities to reinvent myself in my separate loop of the slant figure eight flight, and to rebalance the center that joins us together, restoring harmony on a different plane, intimacy now excluding strong sexual passion, instead rechanneling itself into love's "evanescent and transcendent qualities," expressed in our friendship, care, warmth, regard, mutual dependence, and cherishing each other's company as we age (Wrye, 2003, p. 726). My love for my husband has withstood the test of disappointment and retracting from projective identification, "seeking what was missing in [my] family of origin" through immersion with him (Hollis, 1998, p. 42).

Expressive Landmark 21: Looping back to June 21, 2023

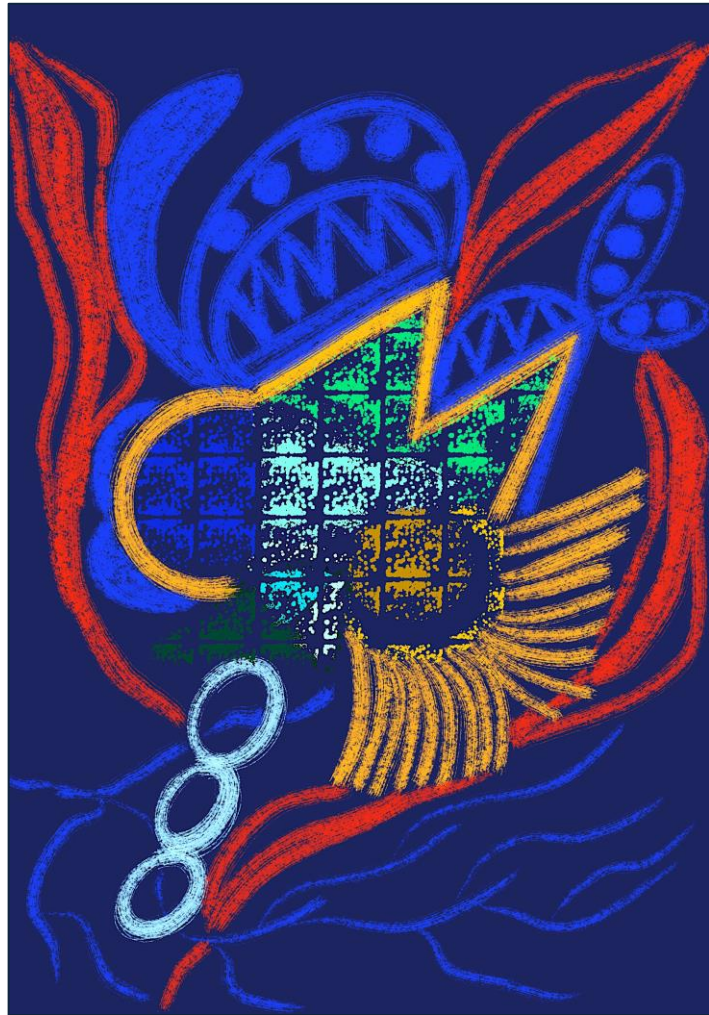
Journal Entry

My throat is tight, a suffocating blocking, like a belt wrapped around my neck; closely watching, hard to swallow anger rising from within my belly, low growling sound of unexpressed rage. My hands are tied along the body, a straightjacket of sorts. My jaws are clenched. I don't speak. My truth remains locked. Clamped up. I stop myself from voicing the innermost feelings, concerns, desires, passions, and aspirations because I believe I will not be heard. I don't speak from the heart, I don't speak my heart; my voice is clothed in my husband's expectations of who I am, or perhaps, even of who I ought to be. He is a straightjacket while also being a propeller. The flights he wants to witness and buttress have always been my intellectual leaps, not my emotional, inner world voyages. One strand instead of four makes our bond. But, I am unfair. I blame. I overreact, focusing on him rather than looking at how to advance on my own journey, clarifying my boundaries, what I would and would not do in relation to him. I fall into the familiar pattern of withdrawal after

relinquishing my magical thinking, the collapse of my princess illusion because I can no longer rely on my husband to offer me psychological grounding. The wisdom of Hollis is nothing but piercing as I struggle to accept the truth: “it is truly frightening to realize how little one is conscious in the formation of intimate relationships” (1998, p. 38). The mirror where I have sought my identity is not the one my husband offers, but what is within me. Only I can give myself what I want, desire, and long for.

June 23, 2023

Reflecting on the meaning of the *Summer Glitter* image, I draw an honest conclusion from the insight I had two days ago when writing my sensory-based exploration of my husband’s influence on my individuation, which also inspired an art piece symbolizing my most important relationships. I have made a number of mistakes relating to him because I did not have a good understanding of the stages in a man’s development (Armstrong, 2003). Our bond since the very beginning has been based on a false perception of the way we connect, or rather on a fantasy I have made myself believe for the thirty-five years we have been together. The revelation in some ways is not surprising, yet it



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, June 16). *The Map of My Relationships*
[Digital art]

is a shock because of the memories that came and the intensity of the sensations. The *Summer Glitter* image also represents the way my spouse has helped me to be myself, but it is mostly linked to my shimmering vision: the bliss of being in my element when I am with him, a self-deception I have created because I adapted and so to please and manipulate to get what I thought my wounded self needed. I betrayed myself, not even realizing I have been doing it for the past three decades. Not knowing the things I wanted to be appreciated for, not knowing my own needs, wants, desires, aspirations, ambitions, and strengths, I let myself be defined through the roles the wedlock imposed—being a wife and a mother.

The map of my relationships, digitally rendered on June 16, 2023, attempts to capture the butterfly dance I am currently experiencing. My grievance about the inability to connect with my husband concerns precisely the unawareness that when he is busy providing for us, he cannot focus on my own needs. These are not his responsibility but mine.

The M, which is also an inverted W, symbolizes the wife and mother aspects I have perceived as constricting, but the fact that they expand into a C, symbolizing the crescent moon, the sea, and the *Magna Mater* (Cirlot, 2001, p. 184), is significant. Yet, M is a sacred letter and represents at once the *yang* and *yin* energies in the universe, also symbolic of water in its original state (or the Great Abyss, the original Mystery?). Citing another source, Cirlot points out that the letter M is the source from which all other temporal forms of existence arise, its colour being sea-green (2001, p. 184).

In this image, I am the soft blue-green triangle at the center. According to Jacob Olesen, the shade of seafoam green, which I involuntary chose to represent me, symbolizes revitalization, signifying also traits such as “invigorating, charmed, hopeful, and insightful.” On the opposite side, it also stands for “insecure, envious, uncertain, and unconfident.” The wisdom of the unconscious again surfacing to consciousness and delivering a meaningful message: the seafoam green of my being is contradictory. The balance of dualities made visible suggests a desired emotional equilibrium and clarity that comes from holding the opposites in tension, “abandoning fears and becoming more aware of [my] purpose” (Olesen). The fear of abandonment has been a pivotal factor in my unconscious mobilization of defenses against it, which ultimately eroded the integrity of my union with my husband. I developed “patterns of submissiveness” (Hollis, 1998, p. 68) that harmed not just me but my partner as well. As Hollis acknowledges, and what my healing of the betrayal

trauma made awfully clear, the only possible direction of my butterfly flight was to form a “large enough sense of self to allow [my husband to be himself]” but to be open to his capacity to wound me, “to risk this kind of soulfulness,” so I can fight fear with love (Hollis, 1998, p. 70). I associate the transformative experience of my butterfly breaking out of the cocoon with the lifting up from “the stuckness of my wounding” and the ego-restraints that have “impeded the assimilation of pain” (Hollis, 1998, p. 73). Taking responsibility for my own journey is the butterfly dance I presently perform.

My husband and son are the green triangles attached to my upper side, the elaborations on top of them representing their beneficial impact on my growth, the teeth—their detrimental influences. The meaning of the green colour most resonant with me is safety and permission. The green light both my husband and son have always given me to pursue my intellectual and creative stirrings, their encouragement to explore and develop my artistic capabilities becoming manifest in the Procreate app they bought me as a birthday present this year—another act of their love and care for me.

The crescent moon is associated with the liberation of the soul from the shackles of the material world, which in Hindu mythology leads to unity with the greater whole that binds everything (Cirlot, 2001, p. 166). Closer to my upbringing, the crescent moon is the symbol of Artemis, psychic energy I powerfully felt coursing through my being in my early twenties, which has been dormant for more than two decades. My personal association with the crescent moon is spiritual growth, a path I am currently discovering, returning to a sense of feminine self that seems I have lost during the period of being a dutiful wife and mother.

The choice of triangle as a shape to symbolize me is congruent with the meaning of the triangle as a sign of spiritual synthesis. Cirlot suggests that the triangle connects symbolically the earth (the material world) and the sky (the spiritual world, 2001, p. 16). The mysterious and magical aspects of existence continue to enthrall me, and the presence of the triangle is indicative of the aspirations to find my numinous nature, my center. The triangle stands for the number three, which is endowed with the symbolism of unity as it resolves a conflict between dualities. The growth of inner harmony (Cirlot, 2001, p. 232) is the accord of intellect, sensitivity, body, deep conscience, and being (Theuwissen & Lamarche, 2012, p. 110), the wounded parts integrated and embraced within the totality of my unique person.

On June 17, 2023 I painted another spontaneous image, titled *Bubbles*, which I later deleted. In it, parallel wavy lines, resembling octopus tentacles, represent my husband and

me. While we swim in the same waters, our trajectories are still aligned, but no longer fused or crossing. I believe we are becoming equal partners because I am more aware of how to relate to him without losing myself. There is much more to learn and there is much more to experience. Thus, the hope is that our partnership could be reformed as we both progress on our parallel but independent journeys in the late years of our lives. My new training in Personality and Human Relations is about the discovery of my deepest being, my deepest truths, my deepest foundations in relation to the transpersonal cosmic unity, and what I wish to become, who I am in truth and beauty, in my fully actualized sacred humanity.

Still, I will end this landmark with a poem that came with the epiphanies here described, the way my spouse has facilitated the discovery of my authentic being. It is my intention to honour the butterfly symbol and its complex, even contrary, meanings. The slant figure eight, seemingly inconsistent pattern of the butterfly dance contains the magic and mystery of my connection with my husband: the coming together in the center of the knot while looping around it in separate but intersecting orbits. While I accept my husband's strong *yang* energy and appreciate it, I can lift my self up on the power of my own wings, soaring to spiritual heights of my own choosing. I don't need the mirror of his idealizations because I can stand up in my relations and be myself, truly existing in an interpersonal matrix that does not undermine my identity, owning my fears and unintentional shadow defenses.

Butterfly Dance

once bright and
 vibrant glowing
orange sphere
now two
 isosceles triangles
sharing a single side
 no longer smooth
the plane of our roundness stretched out
on two parallel but separate trajectories

where my heart is

clouded in distress,
 your sunlight still enters
 hesitantly;
your arms continue to embrace
the mind-gifts I am bringing to the world

a footprint ahead
 and to the right,
 we lockstep

the dunes are greeting us;
between sand-covered toes,
a flowing river of
tiny grains, slipping away

 the thickness of your love

I stand within its radiant orange afterglow

at dusk,
daylight flickers

on the empty beach, the two of us
are watching white-capped waves
incessantly approaching
then retreating to the depths,
washing away what is not mine to bear

we are together,
walking on sea shells,
holding hands

I stand strong

I run toward the end of my horizon

you watch me

taking flight as night

descends

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13 | BOUNDARIES

Expressive Landmark 22: An Elephant on Eggshells – June 28, 2023



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, June 28). *Elephant on Eggshells* [Digital art].

Right from the start, reading about the symbolism of the elephant in relation to the doodle I did last night, two things jump at me: focused power and an improved connection with the sacred Feminine, the animal spirit guiding me to a deeper understanding of the Maiden, Mother, and Crone (King, n.d.). I did explore my relationship with my husband and son in the past ten days in preparation for my next *PRH* training session this Friday. There is probably more to unravel, but new insights came that I am deepening now. The conflict I have lived: the weight of consenting to a traditional marriage and being a mother, the strain—quite palpable, the intense sensations stirring memories-meditations on these two roles—wife and mother, which I expressed poetically.

Perhaps, the healing journey has already taken me through the phase of reconnecting with strong feminine attributes, such as creativity, receptivity, patience, and attuning to my body's instinctive wisdom. More importantly, the revival of forgotten aspects, passions, and desires: arting, knitting, photographing, nature-loving is aiding me on the end-of-life trail I have already embarked

on. Not immediate but also no longer abstract and remote possibility, I need to feel the wholeness of my womanhood in both its wonder and mysterious darkness when Death chances on me unmistakably.

The impact on my professional life, too, is clarified as I continue to read the Internet source. The third relationship I chose to focus on when exploring my human environment was school—both a workplace and a lived inner space by way of my ‘A⁺’ student persona. And so, this is what the author of the elephant symbolism article pens: “Elephant loves seekers and students and often comes at times when you are focused on those types of goals in your life, mundanely or metaphysically” (King, n.d.). How true! Pursuing the *PRH* training is not only to heal myself and past-future generations of immediate kin in this present life—my son, my mom, and my dad—but also my students, hence connecting to a larger energetic field where personal healing is also communal. I have already created two assignments based on current learning: how to achieve harmony of being, deep conscience, body, sensitivity, and intellect. And, the excitement and curiosity about my students’ responses flutters somatically. Instant application, one might say, and I am eagerly expecting the outcomes when I ask the new group of adolescents to try the art-based tasks. So, thank you to the elephant for showing up unconsciously. He is still a young one and standing on eggshells. But, the potential for growth is there.

Playful, too, and child-like, the doodle uplifts me. Here is one last strongly resonant thought from the website on the animal symbolism: “Another application of Elephant energy is to aid you in tracing your heritage” (King, n.d.). My desire to record stories about the ancestral past partially motivates my return to Bulgaria this summer. In terms of previous lives’ explorations, the experience is new to me, yet the idea is fascinating. I am still hesitant to believe in reincarnation, but the bygone continues to exist in the DNA passed down through generations since patterned behaviours and ways of responding to certain situations replay in the offspring via genetics and acculturation, e.g., inter- and trans-generational trauma. Science is only now starting to catch up on these processes, which have guided individual organisms’ development for probably as long as Life has existed. But, it is a novel paradigm, allowing for asking such questions, and so new epigenetic discoveries are confirming the ‘karma’ concept (for lack of a better word) that becomes ‘fate’ because of unresolved unconscious struggles and wounds.

The connection between elephants and clouds, another way to look at the circular and oval shapes in the doodle, is surprising. I have never imagined such a paradoxical symbolic link. Supposedly, the grey colour and the elephant’s size (or shape) instruct the resemblance. Maybe it is

not eggshells but clouds I have instinctively represented, for the elephant in the doodle does seem to be drifting, walking on clouds. Heaviness and lightness, solidity and ephemeral porosity, matter and spirit, the opposites again surface, inextricably entwined, while the young elephant hovers cheerfully above ground.

Egg shells: symbols of transformation and fulfilled potential also signify the balance of weakness and strength, dark and light, Life and Death (Spiritual meaning of eggs). Closely connected to the Earth, eggshells represent the grounding and stabilizing qualities of a strong foundation (Editor Truss). Maybe my way through to meaning is this: I am beginning to rebuild a strong foundation by replacing beliefs and values no longer serving me with new ones as I continue on the path of self-knowledge and healing. I am also beginning to form robust and flexible spiritual armour, creating boundaries and guarding against external forces that might hinder my nascent psychological and transpersonal expansion but also realizing the necessity to be pervious and letting in what comes from without, converting it into personal understanding and existential purpose. Eggshells teach the importance of self-care and maintaining a safe space for emotional growth, too (Editor Truss). I did another image sometime in May, titled *Boundaries*, and the intent of the current landmark is to reflect



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, May). *Boundaries* [Digital art].

on the process of reclaiming myself in relation to others. The topic is self-assertiveness.

The image is busy. Dark brown lines, thick and wavy, form two left-facing B shapes, the first letter of my name, looking back to my past. Opposing them is another first letter of my name, big and orange, gazing at the future, psychological baggage previously accumulated, dragging behind. There is no boundary to halt my moving forward and feeling optimistic about my becoming. The letter is whole, unlike the two smaller left-oriented Bs, which might be indicative of the split 'self' in relation to the other two signs visible on the image: the Cyrillic letters D (mother) and И (wife), the first letters of my son's and husband's names. The number three also stands out in likeness to the Cyrillic letter B once the straight back line is imaginatively erased. It represents my three most important relationships: my immediate family, the most cherished friendships, and my changing relationship to myself—Maiden, Mother, and Crone harmoniously co-existing in the complete woman I could be. The image is full of movement yet still and contained. The past weighing heavily while the future is short and deceptively orange-bright. My expiry date was recently shortened to about three years, maybe a little bit more if I am lucky, so the choice of sunny colour is at odds with the restlessness of the brown lines, fire and earth qualities co-joined. The entire image feels unsettled. While the edges indeed curb the strife and tension between the left and right side of the digital canvas, blurring the borderline between past and future, the present is locked in a strip representative of previous limitations: broken straight streaks lodged between two separate *Вселя* identities.

The significance of boundaries and the ability to assert them cannot be underestimated. As I look at the image, a memory visits. I am twenty-eight years old. I have been a mother for five years. It is January of 1996. A massive assignment looms over my head, and I want to do well. My 'A+' student persona in full throttle speeding ahead on an adventure that is both familiar and unfamiliar as I conduct research on the use of cradles in Ukrainian immigrant families. I have been in Canada for nearly six months. My suitcase is unpacked because I don't know if I want to stay in the freezing temperatures characteristic of this place: Edmonton. My new home. I am a graduate student at the University of Alberta, first year in pursuit of a doctoral degree. And, I am keen.

November 15, 2015: A journal entry

Two nights ago, after my Jungian class, I woke up with a realization about my conflict with a professor in the Ukrainian folklore program so many years ago. The complexes that held me in their grip are elucidated after reading

about a Brazilian priest. In class, we talked about ‘the book’—projections binding the two sides in any conflict and locking them in strong affective opposition, frequently playing out in violence, scapegoating, blaming, discrimination, aggression, and conflict.

Being a new immigrant to Canada, back then I was struggling to adjust, enrolled in a program I did not necessarily want. Displacement, anxiety, homesickness, and loss—a particularly strong affective cocktail—coloured my days in a navy blue haze, at odds with my generally cheerful disposition. I didn’t feel like I belonged. I was different. And also, better educated than the other participants in the Ukrainian material culture course. Not to brag, but the content we were learning was familiar, stirring memories I had of tools and agricultural practices known to me because of my grandparents’ rural life. One would think I would be at ease because the knowledge was already there. Yet, the tensions between the professor and I were tangible: I felt intellectual superiority simultaneously infused with a deep sense of inferiority because of my English language skills. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations of my ideas were frequent, and I doubted if I could write well enough and be successful in a North American academia. Even though I had completed a master’s in philology, specializing in folklore studies, somehow the fear of failure imperilled my conscious mind, complexes lurking in the shadows of my psychic landscapes, which triggered a number of defensive responses, fuelling my anxiety. The fear was sediment-rich, siphoning energy from archetypal depths.

The familial layer of my inferiority complex I carried with me from the country of my origin. I endlessly used to question my intellectual astuteness. Even though my parents and grandparents encouraged and supported me in my studies, especially my mom, who probably projected her unfulfilled ambitions onto mine, the peasant roots have always bothered me. My parents were middle-working class, but their ancestries were rural, so the ambitions I held for intellectual growth compensated for the feelings of inadequacy because of their origins. In my closest extended family, only two relatives held university degrees—my grandaunt and her husband. Hence, even though I routinely excelled at school, I did not think of myself as smart enough, or talented enough, or capable enough. My English language struggles compounded the inferiority complex, plumping it up with fear of speaking my mind, desire for pleasing, and constant discomfort, which regularly expressed in tensions and stiffness travelling all over my body.

Having to communicate in a different language only bolstered my worries, so when the Ukrainian folklore professor gave me a lower grade than I thought I deserved, the complex clasped me in its bosom, refusing to let go, and I compensated by scorning off what he had to teach me, and by being overly keen in expressing my opinions during class, or arguing certain points, even correcting him on things I knew from my Bulgarian life. Outwardly, I appeared haughty. Inwardly, I was the scared little girl who twitched at any critical comment, feeling unappreciated and misjudged.

I see now how I have threatened the professor’s power, both as a man and a scholar, and also as a westerner who had connections to Eastern Europe but lacked first-hand experiences of the life there. Well, I did not have first-

hand experiences of Ukrainian life either, so from the distance of time, I recognize I was in no better position than him in relation to the topics we were discussing in class. So, what he probably perceived was overconfidence, and it might have not sat well with him because of whatever his own issues with self-worth were.

Perfectionism, too, got me into trouble, not directly with the professor, but with my body—I wanted to prove to someone of superior status, but mostly to myself that I could be a researcher and a scholar in the absolute best possible way; it was important for my ego to believe I would excel in an environment I found to be cordially fanatic. I often felt helpless, jumping through hoops I did not want, and most importantly, feeding the perfectionist in me with demands beyond reasonable. For example, I ambitiously tried to squeeze information gathered over a month by interviewing ten first generation elderly Ukrainian women in a ten-pages research paper. Each interview was about an hour long, and their transcription took me fortnight to complete. I did not sleep well. I was spread thin. I worked 14-16 hours a day, writing and rewriting, all the while the qualms about my English language skills eating me inside.

Feeling destabilized because I did not know the rules of the North American graduate studies game, I projected more power onto this professor also because he was a male, which archetypally led me to the dominant male figure in my family—my grandfather. As a woman, an invisible minority, surrounded by rather nationalistic Ukrainian instructors, I indeed saw this particular individual as ‘enemy’ whom I had to surrender to if I was going to be successful. The situation did not bode well with my independent Warrior-queen (Athena and Artemis) energies. So, when he treated me as a “Soviet ethnographer,” with disdain for my knowledge and research skills, I became enraged and wanted to show him I was better than what he expected of me. Pleasing him became a priority over the deep knowledge of what was good for my bodymind: resting, spending time with my loved ones, and balancing studies, family responsibilities, and leisure-rest. And so, the archetypal forces fuelled my anger, channelling the desire to resist the domineering, grandfather-Father imago in my family, the young Ukrainian professor becoming the recipient of my projective identification. Yes, the Disciplinarian whom I have not yet befriended then was guarding the young, fearful girl wanting the approval of her elders. She craved to be seen, heard, and validated. With a brittle sense of self, I craved to be seen, heard, and validated for who I was and not for who the professor believed I were. My own nationalistic pride burgeoned and expressed itself in subversive acts of challenging him on his competence, and more importantly, by complaining to his supervisor of what I perceived as unfair, discriminatory, and undeserved treatment. The conflict left a bitter taste in my body: a lasting distrust of my capabilities and an added affective charge to my inferiority complex. My boundaries, as fragile as these were even before my arrival to Canada, loosened further, and the sense of self thinned to a sliver of self-love and self-worth.

March 31, 2024

Today, I am curious about ‘the hook.’ What made me the attractor for the professor’s projections in that class? What did I project onto him, and what did he project onto me? I cannot speak on his behalf, of course, but it is clear we were unconsciously seeing in each other aspects of ourselves we denied, or were unable to identify with back then. I think he became the outlet for my displacement anxiety, one way in which it actualized being the turning of my Bulgarian identity into a fetish (Ahmed, 1999, p. 338) and generating a victimization narrative of my immigrant experience in relation to the Ukrainian professor’s attitudes and behaviour. The border within (Dowd, 2011, p. 301) became more rigid, and that allowed me to find a vantage point from where I could bear the loss of place I was experiencing. I came to perceive the young man as narrow-minded and petty since he was doing research too steeped in minute details. To this day, I wonder how one could obtain a Ph.D. by counting nails in their grandparents’ house. Yes, my arrogance still speaking loudly. But age is also shedding light on the episode differently. I singled out this professor because he was young, had received his Ph.D. recently, and was doing research I sneered at. Indirectly, the program I originally was supposed to complete I disfavoured, in this way unconsciously belittling the efforts I was putting in to succeed in a field I considered inconsequential. I did change programs later, and the dissatisfaction dissipated the more I engaged with the research and writing of my dissertation. The bottom line, however, is that I was seeing myself in this young and ambitious man, what I feared to be or become, with added female issues. In retrospect, I would say at the crux of the conflict was a patriarchal discomfort with the strong *yang* energies coursing through me because of my negative Father complex: I was unable to trust my own strengths, competence, resources, talents, and gifts, and so I distrusted these aspects in the young Ukrainian professor as well, and in my overreaction, I attacked him, hurting my bodymind in the process.

What also constellated me was an ethnic complex, a feeling of being discriminated against because I was from Eastern Europe, coming from a small sovereign country whose geographical location was a mystery to most strangers I met. Either completely oblivious to its existence, or confusing Bulgaria for one of the Soviet Union republics: these were the two responses I typically received when responding to questioning about my place of origin. It was a covert discrimination, which I did not recognize back then, trying to fit in, trying to suppress my background and learn the new culture. So, I did. At the expense of my bodymind balance. Now, I think about the images that came to me while dwelling in an alternate reality—the chosen family, with all the consequent

symbolic implications of compensating for feeling inadequate and constantly seeking approval from others, not trusting my own value. The cultural layer of the complex could be further explained as a space of forgetting where I felt consciously comfortable and unconsciously unwelcomed. A resident alien. A “migrant body” (Ahmed, 1999, p. 344). Leaving Bulgaria and settling in Canada produced the tension between ‘homes;’ one too many but no “Home”—a place where memory can hinge the past to the present and allow me to experience the continuity of my identity (Ahmed, 1999, p. 330). My psyche launched onto the chosen family narrative because it afforded a mythical-fantastical space of belonging, the inner conflict becoming so incontrollable, my conscious mind—overworked, sleepless, and overly absorbed with the research task—not strong enough to contain it. My first ‘mental breakdown’ happened in January 1996, a physical symptom of the multiple boundaries I was crossing, both literally and metaphorically, all at the same time.

Back in the day, I also harboured a whole set of other projections, including some caused by family tensions. So, my unconscious mobilized to find an appropriate target, unifying the cultural with the personal to offer protection against overwhelming feelings of vulnerability and perceived threat to my being. It is difficult to recollect exactly what the visions were revealing, but I understand, with my current knowledge of trauma, that I was unable to keep in check the archetypal energies, which were giving me clues about deeply troubling previous woundings. My boundaries were too leaky when the altered state of mind took over. Perceiving reality through the painful past experiences of loss and inadequacy, the flight into the vision-world was a coping mechanism, which the medical professionals did not quite understand and honour but treated as a mental illness. It is no coincidence that all my experiences with altered states of mind and multiple realities were provoked when I immersed myself into the creative ‘zone,’ a particularly absorbing state of mind I enter with intense intellectual work. I had no understanding of the importance of staying body-centered and grounded, witnessing the pain, loss, frustration, and perceived insufficiencies with self-compassion and no judgment. I did not know how to define my boundaries and hold strong to what mattered to my being, without falling for the tricks of my splintered psyches.

April 13, 2024: Reaching a Frontier

Boundaries are liminal spaces where the inner and outer come into contact, enclosing the self and guarding it from non-selves and their intrusions. External influences, interactions with others, societal norms, cultural values, publicly sanctioned behaviours: the boundaries a person

builds allow for negotiating the size of the space the self occupies. Of course, the boundaries are flexible, and they need be, for otherwise there is little room for psychological growth. But also, the boundaries must be solid (not rigid!), formed and informed by deep understanding of one's own humanity—strengths and limitations, talents and deficiencies, capacity to give and receive, to stand in relation without losing oneself while still respecting the humanity of the other.

If thought as energetic limitations, the boundaries we establish in relation to others underpin secured attachments and healthy relations. These connections require the flow of energy to be free, no impediments to the release of emotional charges. But most importantly, the free flowing energy implies there is a specific beneficial way in which the transformation of the outer becomes inner, and vice versa (Binns, 1994, p. 86), and the harmony between a person and the environment is maintained. In this sense, personal boundaries need be nurtured and allowed to “choreograph the specific modes of openness” (Binns, 1994, p. 85) when we relate to others, simultaneously acting from a place of integrity and autonomy. Boundaries, therefore, are where different kinds of states are consciously or unconsciously entered and exited, and so “give the relationship [between self and Other] a particular distinctive form” (Binns, 1994, p. 87).

Maintaining personal boundaries is a complex, energy-consuming process, requiring constant awareness of our changing relational contexts. I first became aware of my personal boundaries during the opening class of my Integrative Body Psychotherapy training. I remember the warm October day when the group of twelve people gathered in the kitchen for snacks and in preparation for the boundary exercise we were going to practice in pairs, for enough space was needed to accommodate all of the duos. Choosing a ball of yarn, we were invited to select our partners, and it so happened that I ended up working with the only man in the group. He was nervous, and so was I. As we sat down on the kitchen floor, facing each other, I noticed my body tensing. I picked up the yarn, but it felt wrong to use it to encircle myself, and I kept pushing it aside, unsure of its efficacy in making visible the space my self occupied. The string borderline felt threatening. At the end, I left the thread on the floor, outlining a circle that was there more for my partner's sake than for my own. I did the exercise, again, from a position of wanting to please others rather than following what spoke from within.

The personal insight from the boundary exercise, though, was profound and surprising. I became aware of the fact that my imaginary boundaries were really strong and that I can maintain them in my mind's eye unwaveringly. I actually did not need a thread to tell me where I began and the other person ended. In addition, I realized the need to open space for my being—the known

and the unknown—within the boundaries I set up for my self, and make room in my own container by shifting from center to edges, repeatedly, to allow for the self's expansion or contraction as the circumstances called for. I could say with certainty, I felt conflicted, for my heart squeezed hurtfully, but delighted when my partner acknowledged the same bodily response to the boundary making—the empathetic resonance between us truly shocked me, for I did not believe it possible prior to this moment. Empathizing without even being aware of it happening because the resonance takes place below the threshold of consciousness: it was a fascinating discovery! October 4, 2019 thus marked my first introduction to the power of somatic empathy (Stanley, 2016). But most importantly, for the first time I viscerally experienced my personal boundaries, recognizing the capacity to hold space for my self despite their fragility. It was not that I did not have a solid 'self', but the appropriate balance to be reached for the effective functioning of my personal boundaries I had to learn how to achieve, how to move consciously between the perspectives constitutive of my being in relation to others in order to exist as an adult woman able to assert myself and respond to the physical and social environment in empowering rather than self-injuring ways. In other words, I had to develop somatic self-awareness and the capacity to bring the unconscious into consciousness, seeking for a healthy consolidation.

We learn to maintain our boundaries through attachments and break-ups, discords and amends, mismatches and repairs. But, self-exploration is the spring-well of guidelines setting up the course to arrive at a destination. I learned the hard way, too, about my personal boundaries in an incident with a colleague, which unveiled the deep roots of my patriarchal conditioning and buying into values holding me hostage to my own prejudices, self-judgments, and “emotional backlogs” (Wiest, 2020, p. 158).

In 2001, I began my teaching career at Harry Ainlay High School. My collegial relationships were beautiful, finding a respectful and caring department head, which over the history of our relations also became my dear friend. Surrounded by expert-teachers, I thrived. I felt appreciated and valued as a member of the English department. I was a young teacher, of course, even though I had six years of teaching experience in Bulgaria, but the fissured boundaries of my sense of self were a constant warning. Doubts abounded. I kept comparing myself to the rest of my colleagues, often to find myself lacking. Yet, I also held my head high because I was the only person on staff who was earning a Ph.D. The times were exciting, for I was immersed into a fertile pond, brimming with life-opportunities for growth, both personally and professionally. I had found a place where my body felt safe enough to begin “reinhabiting [a] space” (Ahmed, 1999, p. 342), and my being could

flourish because I had found a new community and a sense of belonging. I had grown a “second skin” because my permeable boundaries afforded feeling homely despite being away from home (Ahmed, 1999, p. 341).

But everything changed when a new department head came. He was young and ambitious. He thought he was a visionary. He wanted to rattle the old system and built a new foundation for all of us to follow. Ironically, the major pedagogical innovation he brought to our collective was called precisely that: “Foundations.” A lot of garbage, I still think, but he was fervent and found the right set of followers to boost his ego and cause divisions. He shattered the carefully balanced high wire we were all walking as professionals and colleagues. He was an ageist. And, I hated it.

The fact that my son was also his student compounded the impact. I could not speak freely my criticisms because of strict moral principles instilled in me during my years of Bulgarian schooling. Parents side with teachers and don’t interfere in their pedagogical decisions. Children are to respect and comply with what the teacher demands of them, regardless of the consequences because ‘the teacher knows best.’ So, I swallowed my worries and underplayed my anger, frustration, and disappointment. Respectfully, I tried to mediate between the two opposing departmental factions, fully aware of what was going on in the department head’s classroom. I witnessed my son’s strife. I noticed him struggling to make sense of the nonsensical. But, I kept quiet because, in my mind, a bigger cause was at stake. How wrong was I! When most of my more experienced colleagues left in tandem at the end of the school year, I was bereft. In the blink of an eye, from the youngest staff in the English department, I became one of the most experienced teachers. And that placed me in a paradoxical position: internally conflicted and dissatisfied with my own ability to assert my boundaries and stand up, I became firmer in opposing the young man’s will and power. I resorted to being subversive. But that took a huge toll on my energy balance. I probably could claim, too, that the tensions in my body stored in loads during that time of my life led to chronic emotional stress and my current conditions.

“The seed of self-assertiveness is found in our deep aspiration to exist” (Theuwissen & Lamarche, 2012, p. 59). During the several years of this person’s leadership, I had one open confrontation with him. It was at a professional development day, which was held outside of the school grounds in a historical educational site, McKey Avenue School, located in downtown Edmonton. I remember my resolve. The female assistant principal whose portfolio included supervising the English department also attended. The large room held weight, sending signals to my body that important decisions have been made there. Dark wood, large windows, long table around

which my colleagues and I were seated: the setting details filled me with awe and reverence for the past power plays the site had witnessed.

I believe the change of space significantly contributed to what unfolded. As an unfamiliar locality but steeped in history, the room itself provided a ‘metaphorical’ standpoint for an expanded vision, which accounted for both my embodied mature womanhood, confident in my knowledge, intelligence, competence, and sensible judgment, and for the sensorial lived experience contextualizing the release of build up emotional charges without engaging in violent self-criticism. In fact, the opposite was true: I was open to the need to find a solution, yet not allowing anger and frustration to guide my thoughts and actions. The site afforded much needed physical and affective distance. I was dwelling in ‘in-between’ space where I felt free to speak my mind because it was about my practice and my relationship with my students, what could serve us best in the educational process. And, the department head’s vision was not my pathway to achieving my professional and personal priorities. In short, I refused—politely but firmly—to comply with the timelines and set plans for common assessments, provisioning an adjustment to my participation when and if these played in favour of my pedagogical autonomy and in service to my students. Stemming from my deep conscience and in agreement with my being, I was making decisions infused with my personal truth and informed by a focused power, and so they carried weight and were appropriate and respectful.

What I could not always successfully do in my personal life: assert regard for my boundaries, I managed to do on more than one occasion in my professional life, achieving a balance between feeling inner freedom and co-dependence. Again, my experiences teach me that maintaining personal boundaries is a complicated, and often, paradoxical process. The awareness of the pattern: young, ambitious, too keen males triggering my complexes keeps signalling where I may still need to heal—cultivating resistance while also being adaptable whenever the situation asks for.

The progress on the elephant path has been slow not only in realizing who my true being is and acting in accordance with her, but also in being a student of my own inner geography. It is a painstaking work to build a solid foundation with values that continue to sustain me. Tethered yet soaring, and returning to reality fully aware where I stand at any given moment and in any given situation—the reward is a peace of mind and confidence deferential to both self and Other. My resources are building up, my provisions are plenty, and I am learning how to take risks in relationships where previously I did not dare to exist.

I really don't need a thread to tell me what my boundaries are, and so I close the circle returning to the elephant on eggshells. The inner satisfaction and calmness I have been experiencing lately indicate I am moving forward, relying on internal riches, transpersonal expansion, and a solid foundation. Rebuilding. Restructuring. Reinventing. Remaining honest and humble. The opposites complementing, fluctuating, pushing and pulling, but propelling me in the same direction—wholeness, self-fulfillment, and personal growth. And, gratitude for the abundance within and without: I am persisting on this wellbeing-furthering and soul-healing track.

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14 | PURPLE TURKEY



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, October 15). *Lymph Nodes* [Digital art].

The swollen lymph nodes on the left side of the neck have been with me since late May. Two biopsies later, I am not at all in the clear about the story my body tells. The second biopsy went sideways, for the female radiologist injured a nerve, and now I have to deal with the complication of a dysfunctional left arm. The mood blackened and then lightened when the imaginal turkey visited, easing the sensations of total constriction, tensing not just the left shoulder muscles but also my heart. A black hand squeezing, cupping it with its long black fingers. I felt Death Mother's embrace (Woodman & Sieff, 2015): a weighty and all consuming, deadening hopelessness and dejection. But, the turkey shows me I am not giving in to her call yet. Hanging on a string, the tail feathers keep their attachment to the body, still balancing the scales, so neither a clear *yes*, nor a clear *no* is the answer. Suspended.

The wild turkey is native to North America. According to The Wandering Bull, LLC website, the symbolic meaning of turkeys connects to the Earth's wilderness, to what human beings cannot conquer. Turkeys are prideful birds, so I wonder if it is not the newly felt pride in my own inner strength and resilience that spilled onto the screen, the trial of the botched biopsy escalating then soothing the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, the hole in my belly, the long black fingers around my heart, crushing without release. The Fear.

The unconscious gives me what I need, for the unbidden funky purple turkey image brings a smile to my face. She fills my heart with quiet joy. Drawing her is a tectonic somatic-emotional shift

from dark to light, from despair to content with what I have. Yet, I want to explore the night illuminating the light. Death Mother's voice I keep hearing, calling me to unpack an incident, which happened when I was nine days old. I am going under.

Not that long ago, my mom told me I almost died in my infancy. My grandmother suffered an allergic shock to penicillin, so my mom was busy saving her mother's life while I was left unattended. Possibly, I choked. Or something else happened. The mind blanks, but the body remembers the blackness it has experienced: the suffocating feeling of air constriction, airways blocked—tension building as I open my mouth widely but no oxygen flows in. I feel the pressure building in my lungs. I feel the long black fingers tightening their grip around my neck. Then, a neighbour saw I was struggling to breathe. Picked me up and shook me upside down until I gasped, and the air streamed back into my lungs. My heart must have been pounding erratically, my little self—petrified. My first encounter with Medusa, the mortal Gorgon sister who turns people into stone if they look directly at her face.

According to Sieff, the myth of Medusa depicts the energy of Death Mother most vividly (Woodman & Sieff, 2015, p. 64). In Woodman's recount of the myth, the beautiful mortal woman makes love to Poseidon, the sea god, in Athena's temple. Enraged, the goddess representing an intellect severed from flesh, turns the Gorgon sister into a monster, with venomous snakes for hair and a terrifying look casting into stone whoever gazes into her eyes (Woodman & Sieff, 2015, p. 69). Medusa's sensual energy today claims her rightful place as the counterpart to an overly developed reasoning and thinking capacities. Woodman explains: "In our culture, with its emphasis on intellect, will power, control and rationality, Athena's un-lived life leads to the inevitable creation of Medusa—the two energies are chained to each other" (p. 69).

An Aside: The Medusa

In my interpretation, Medusa is another, particularly fascinating manifestation of the dark feminine. I discover she resides in my uterus, an image a semi-awakened state brings forth as I feel her energy radiate from within. The connection between Ereshkigal, a Sumerian goddess of the underworld and an earlier version of the dark feminine, and Medusa—the ancient Greek tradition's patriarchal interpretation of it—is obvious, and the literature does not shy away from asserting that the myth of Medusa carries powerful implications for the experiences of modern women (Wyatt, 2008). Her petrifying stare and hair of writhing snakes are the archetypal figure's most defining

features. The young mortal woman Athena punishes for her sacrilege: giving to the passions of her body, to her carnal stirrings and instinctive sexual drives. Is it possible that my own body is rebelling against the deadening of my sensuality and inattention to the most essential needs of the flesh? Abandoning my body also means abandoning my life (Woodman & Sieff, 2015, p. 67).

The swollen lymph nodes, their fast proliferating tissue, perhaps physically manifest the desire for change, which a more loving and cheerful attitude will instigate: embracing Life's joys, *Erms*, and feeling gratitude for the abundance (hence, the turkey!) already present in me. Re-centering is necessary; otherwise, the place of repose, the "nucleus of stone" (Alizade, 2018, p. 26) cannot serve its purpose: becoming the "living rock" (Alizade, 2018, p. 27) of my being. Because the swollen lymph nodes are reactive, likely to the adenocarcinoma, they signal somatically what the "I" still struggles to grasp: the need for re-orientation and a profound perspective shift that would sustain wellness in a waning body, for the disorders are consequent to past choices, urging me to make different ones in the present moment. The enlarged lymph nodes invite a radical reimagining of my personality's psychological organization, such that I am supported in meeting "the limitations of my existence and my capabilities to respond to them and to experience a mixture of trepidation, delight, and humility" (Kopytin, 2022, p. 49).

The various meanings of the verb "petrified" intrigue me because they all imply a transformative act. According to the Canadian Oxford Dictionary (Barber, 1998), to petrify is "to paralyze with fear, astonishment, etc." (p. 1087). In addition, the turning of organic matter into a stony substance is also a process of petrification, similar but not identical to fossilization. In its metaphorical meaning, petrification is the opposite of animation because in the act of replacing organic matter with minerals one becomes a stone, suggesting an insensate, inert, immobile, lacking vitality or energy entity. But within an "animated world" paradigm (Fidyk, 2013), petrification is an act of metamorphosis, becoming a new form. Stones are a part of the Earth, and thus, one transformed into a stone becomes closer to an earth-bound form, implying solidity and stability, the consolidation of psychic structures constituting a unique constellation of personal characteristics: "that minute fragment of inorganic material that must be at the center of the oyster so that the pearl can develop" (Alizade, 2018, p. 26). To petrify is also used synonymously as a substitute for "terrify," in both cases indicating the state of extreme fear or terror. Noteworthy, "to terrify" produces also the word "terrific," which in a loose sense can mean "very great," and its inverted colloquial usage, beginning in 1888, expresses a state of excellence (Terrify).

Where do these linguistic explorations lead me in terms of the dark feminine? Medusa is a paradoxical image: both ferocious and erotic, both startling and captivating, both young and old. In the ancient Greek language, where the name originates, it means “the ruling one” (Dexter, 2010, p. 25). According to Dexter, the name derives from the present participle of the Greek verb “*medo*” (“I rule,” p. 25). The earliest texts describe the only mortal of the three Gorgon sisters as a fearful monster whose disembodied head adorned warriors’ shields. Agamemnon, one of the ancient Greek heroes in Homer’s *Iliad* (approximately 750 BCE), seeks the Gorgon’s protection, her image etched on his shield: “And on it was put as a crown the Gorgon, with ferocious face, . . . , with dreadful glance, and about her were Terror and Flight” (as cited in Dexter, 2010, p. 26). In the *Odyssey* (approximately 725 BCE), she is a creature who dwells in the underworld; Persephone can send Medusa to the Upper world to track heroes (Dexter, 2010, p. 27). In Hesiod’s *Theogony* (approximately 700 BCE), she is a beautiful maiden the sea god *rapes* “in a soft meadow in the midst of spring flowers” (Dexter, 2010, p. 27).

Medusa’s powerful eyes are spellbinding and magical. They reveal, expose, and transmute. They are “the eyes of [D]eath” (Brinton Perera, 1981, p. 31). But, as Dexter in agreement with Vicki Noble claims, “in the West, [a] woman is split off from this locus of power” (2010, p. 28, footnote 14). Symbolically, the myth represents the fragmentation of the bodyful (Caldwell, 2018) female wholeness through Medusa’s disembodied head, which Athena wears on her *aegis*. Body snubbing, the ancient Greek goddess of wisdom, the protectress of the arts and creativity, civilization, law and justice, seizes the lethal powers of the slain Medusa but does not let these penetrate her. However, she operates under the shield of the Gorgon’s strong forces. The implication seems to be that without this deadly aspect, neither law, nor justice, nor creativity can be effective. Destruction and creation go hand in hand, and the integration of the Medusa and Athena¹ energies in a woman seems to fulfill the purpose of making her whole again. Yet, in patriarchal consciousness the two archetypal figures remain separated—one to be revered and worshiped, the other feared, and hence, conquered and slayed.

The blood of Medusa, too, is both a poison and a cure. Athena gives Medusa’s blood to Erichthonius, the ancestor of the Athenian line: “one [drop] is deadly, the other brings healing of

¹ Athena’s relationship to her own femininity is mostly hidden. She represents “the repression of the feminine and the undoing of the repression as a soul task” (Downing, 1999, p. 110). As a goddess of the arts and creativity, “she is concerned to further the outwarding of soul, its expression and realization in what we do and make” (Downing, 1999, p. 118).

diseases” (Euripides, *Ion*, as cited in Dexter, 2010, p. 29). According to Appolodorus (2nd century BCE), Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine, received from Athena the Gorgon’s blood and used that from the left side of her body “for the destruction of [humanity]” and that from the right side “for saving [humanity]” (as cited in Dexter, 2010, p. 30). This ambivalence about the fatal aspects of Medusa advises a more ancient connection to the Great Goddess and a much more intriguing, complex, and polyvalent image than the patriarchal mythical accounts provide. Dexter’s conclusion echoes my intuitive inkling: Medusa represents a powerful divine female archetype related to the Neolithic deities of European and Near Eastern cultures, which are believed to have ruled over all of the realms and, in their symbolical iconographic images, embodied the continuum of birth, growth, decay, death, and rebirth (Dexter, 2010, p. 33). The splitting of Medusa, her beheading, results in “disembodied wisdom,” which is very dangerous, “a warning to all women to hide their powers, their totalities” (Dexter, 2010, p. 33-34).

In this sense, Medusa may be interpreted as a sacrifice. It is the sacrifice of the feminine instinctive, bodily knowledge. Therefore, it is a sacrifice of human openness to the most intimate of Life’s secrets. According to Dexter:

As Medusa’s head is severed from her body, so her wisdom is severed from her physical self, her sexuality. She has slept with Poseidon and given birth to Pegasus and Chrysaor, but as soon as she fulfills the function of mother, she becomes disembodied head. She is frozen in her persona of death (2010, p. 37).

As a symbol, Medusa for me represents the knowledge of mortality, the acceptance of Death’s finality but also of its regenerative cyclicity, as Demetra George (1992) argues, which is empowering. Both in the myth of Inanna and the myth of Medusa, the knowledge of demise gives power to goddesses who lack wholeness. Women know death in birth, for the baby to be born the womb (temporarily) must die until the next cycle begins. It is also the baby metaphorically dying as it transitions from the womb’s internal container to the external world. Surrendering to Death, both in metaphorical terms as a descent to the unconscious underworld, and literally as a process of physical aging, decay, and disintegration of the body, is a Great Mystery eluding comprehension. According to Olivetti (2016), Medusa’s “rhythmic mutability” represents a psychic dynamism of revivifying inert matter, imbuing one’s life force with psychic value and meaning (p. 39).

Medusa’s cold, freezing eyes caution me that I can metaphorically turn into stone, that is, I can be rendered lifeless and immovable, the vital energies and affects not responding to the numinous core, if I refuse, like Athena, my body’s physicality and sensuality. Medusa’s dark powers

inspire me to answer “the impulse to sacrifice” which, according to Jung, “comes from the Self, the unconscious” (Feather, 2013, p. 340). A necessary sacrifice in the pursuit of integration and psychological growth, suffering—pain, loss, despair, depression, loneliness, aging—must be endured and appreciated for the wisdom they bring. My own becoming is related to the processes of outgrowing previous identities, driven by the desires and goals of the “I,” undergoing my descent and the knowledge it brings through the shattering of “I” ideals. I must reconnect with the deeper sources of instinctual, intuitive, bodily wisdom. The dark feminine, if I am to believe Gustafson (2003), is an “expression of the need for psychic-spiritual wholeness in an age and culture that has far over-valued the place of reason and the need for causal explanation” (p. 2). No wonder, my inner Medusa is located in the womb: the fleshly organ and the original locus of my life force. To the restorative and consciousness expanding energies of Medusa, I must surrender! Her powers “draw [me] into life and lived experience—an instinctual, visceral, embodied phenomenon” (Olivetti, 2016, p. 41). But more than that, I am looking for reviving the energies of the “wild woman archetype” in me, which Estés so eloquently and vividly depicts in her book (1995). The place where the archetype resides in us, as the scholar muses, is “the place where mind and instincts mingle, where a woman’s deep life finds her mundane life,” being the “knucklebone on which the worlds of [rationality and *mythos*] turn” (p. 34/795; italics added). According to Estés, “there is a speculation that the immune system of the body is rooted in this mysterious psychic land, and also the mystical, as well as all archetypal images and urges, including our God-hunger, our yearning for the mysteries, and all the sacred instincts, as well as those which are mundane” (p. 34-35/795). For the Wild Woman I am searching, so I can tap into Her primordial and endless knowledge and wisdom.

My purple turkey image is a representation of hope. Trauma—physical and emotional—is a wounding so deep, it destroys the connection I have with my felt sense of wellness. It is long lasting, and I personally believe, an incurable and indelible mark on the body and soul, so while there maybe a reduction of the symptoms and coping with the painful emotions or physical suffering by learning how to manage, modulate, and live with them in a healthier way, the scars remain. Scabbed or bruised, like a deep hematoma that refuses to dissolve, and even if it does, the ruptured blood vessels remember and are weakened, becoming more prone to future injury than before.

Activation of the nervous system in trauma is automatic, so the point is: can one catch the response and regulate it, or help another to temper it so that the wounding is experienced naturally as a conscious memory, no longer overwhelming and requiring the protective mechanisms we have developed to keep the emotional pain at bay? Trauma is a psychic wound, which, even when healed,

leaves a bruise, a tenderness, and a softness opening me up to compassion and empathy, but it is only if I know how to care for that wound. Trauma, however, cannot be cured. Does not disappear. It can be processed; it can be metabolized but not eradicated. Perhaps, it can be transformed into a fertilizer for transpersonal rebirth and becoming. But it cannot be made well, especially if the wounding goes back to the first minutes of life or even before that, to the ancestral bloodlines.

What would be an appropriate metaphor to express an embodied trauma? A stamp. I am stamped because the imprint the body stores in memory is always there, ready to surface, to make itself visible (like a tattoo, really!). It is an invisible stamp. It is a soul stamp that can morph into a tattoo and an art. The art of wounding. The art of healing. The art of living whole.

Purple Turkey Insights: Connecting the Dots

There is unreleased anger in my jaw and in my pelvic segment. The blockages in the throat and its ailments are also signs that my centers of self-expression, self-assertion, and self-advocacy have been dysfunctional. I haven't been able to stand up for my self. I haven't spoken my heart. I have resisted fully expressing what my body senses and knows. But, I am learning to offer attention to the interconnected parts because unwillingness to change would prevent my opening to the lived experience as layers of anger and sadness continue to cover my fleshly wisdom and inner truths. I am smashing the stony cast of my "frozen ... persona of death" (Dexter, 2010, p. 37) by liberating the inner Medusa, and I am firmly gripping the precious living rock of my being, which produces my unique personality (Alizade, 2018, p. 27).

My sadness is a familiar pattern. I seek refuge in it. And yet again, it must concede to the succour of bodyful Joy.

In the past, the intellect provided pleasures for me aplenty. I sought satisfaction in the play of ideas. According to Woodman, an "addiction to ideas" is no different from any other addiction, filling a void that the unheeded cries of a silenced body produce: the addiction being "the shadow side of the unheard body" (2015, p. 69). And so, the swollen lymph nodes in my left side of the neck bespeak a truth I have overlooked: the rejection of my corporeality, allowing the Death Mother energy to enter my cells, "directing [my] own Death mother back to [myself]" (Woodman & Sieff, 2015, p. 71). It is all related: the CML diagnosis, the enlarged lymph nodes, the bulging lumbar disc, and the sciatica injury. Now, an added to this cluster of symptoms is the damage of the spinal accessory nerve, which affects the movement of the left trapezius muscle. One more recent

diagnosis widens the circle: the mutated gland cells in my right lung, making it ‘bleed’ fluid in the pleura and obstructing its full expansion. Shortness of breath. Coughing. Phlegm accumulated in my throat. All are familiar to my body—I just did not connect the dots: what I felt as an infant the first time Death and I met inscribed a trauma response, which throughout my life has signalled my body’s petrification: stiffening, terror-paralysis the fear of annihilation spawns. The resulting psyching injuries, related to my first encounter with abandonment and suffocation, my mother’s involuntary neglect, upset the balance of *yin* and *yang* energies that the inattention to and mistreatment of my maturing body augmented, playing out now in life-threatening illnesses.

Likewise, I also remember that as a child I often had tonsillitis. My throat has been a ‘weak’ physical part since my earliest years. To this day, tightening of my throat is one of my most pronounced somatic stress responses. A pressure that feels as if a cord is wrapped around it, slowly being pulled in two opposite directions. The pattern is nothing but clear: the first petrifying encounter with Death and abandonment my body has never failed to recall.

Added to this fear is also the realization about how my trauma has replayed in my son’s life: he was born with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. I don’t intend to exaggerate the significance of the event, yet I cannot also ignore it as a pure coincidence. The hope is that healing myself will break a possible pattern of suffering related to physical symptoms that convey the lack of healthy emotional release and complete self-expression, existing in the full richness of a person’s true being; the over-focusing on sadness rather than joy, severing body from intellect and forgetting there is pleasure (and hurt!) in both. The purple turkey image, accordingly, reminds me that what we need is already present in each one of us. The abundance of talents and gifts, which we are destined to recognize, appreciate, develop, and fully expresses through “the art of existing” (Theuwissen & Lamarche, 2012) with gratitude and grace.

Now, it all comes to a clarity that leaves me looking at Death Mother’s ‘face’—the chilling Gorgon—straight on, learning the most profound and numinous truths one can possibly learn. Are they medicine? I am walking a path leading to more self-discovery and, hopefully, healing. Reclaiming my multifaceted femininity, discarding the obsession with intellectual pursuits, returning to the wholesome, lively, and joyous felt sense of wellness hosted in a beautiful, loved, and treasured sensing and sensual body. And all that, expressed in the symbolic potency of art and creations marrying the physical, mental, emotional, and cosmic (spiritual, transcendent, transpersonal, sacred). This is the restorative and restorying soul-track the funky purple turkey energy guide takes me on.

November 25, 2023

Of course, there is more. From a skilled, deceitful trickster to a shy and elusive bird, the turkey in Native American folklore seems to carry various meanings. I am curious, however, about the Aztec god/dess *Chalchiuhtotolin* (Jade Turkey), a symbol of powerful sorcery (Wikipedia contributors). As in other deities of disease, in the female form, the goddess can cleanse people from their afflictions (contaminations), “[absolving] them from their guilt, and [overcoming] their fate” (Wikipedia contributors).

If it is about guilt I am carrying deep in my body, how is it related to my lymph nodes and lung issues? The answer chanced upon me yesterday: guilt is the inability to see there was nothing else one could do. What has happened IS, for entertaining the “what ifs” results in guilt accumulating into the lungs (Bernard, 2023). There is no “if it happened differently” because what happens to me is what needs to happen, so I can live my life fully, with passion and purpose.

The surgeon who performed the third biopsy the other day told me there were six hundred lymph nodes in the body. As part of the immune system, the lymphatic system is about balance: balance of fluids, balance of response to the threats of infections, to the threats of becoming ill. The swollen lymph nodes have been with me, gradually increasing in size, over the past four months, and I still wonder about the messaging. Did I return to work too early? Is something else surfacing that is about my inner-outer world imbalance?

Perhaps, it has to do with my nourishment and the insight that dawned on me as I was amplifying a pleasant sensation, still lingering since February when I created the *Inner Child's Delight* photo art image. If intuitive connections are valid sources of knowledge, deepening my ability to understand the symbolic language of the unconscious, the swollen lymph nodes remind me that I have to return to what is essential: the feeling of content with what I have. Am I now harvesting the efforts of my inner work? It feels that way with the last exploration I did for my *PRH* training, finding the strength to return from the land of deep rest (de-pressed) and fight the desire to answer the call of Death Mother affirmatively, the purple turkey image being the fulcrum effecting the relatively swift and radical mind state shift.

My afflictions on the left side (lymph nodes, injured nerve, ACL replacement, broken wrist and sprained ankle in childhood) are conceivably related to my *yin* energies. My own total femininity being discounted and disused for most of my life. Imbalance of *yin* qualities, which I previously mused on in several of the expressive landmarks. Discovering, honouring, and expressing the dark

feminine aspects of my being is a demand, for I am healing a matrilineal traumatic legacy. My grandmother, my mother, possibly my grandaunt. It feels like a circle. I start moving forward to come back to the same spot: right side—father, left side—mother. Both dis-eased, both loaded with suffering. While fear and helplessness immobilized me just a few days before my second biopsy, the purple turkey energy, spontaneously arising, got me out of the stuckness. Now, I am facing a lot more serious questions, and this expressive landmark is a reflection on the answers I currently have.

What is a holding pattern I have enacted repeatedly in a state of traumatic paralysis? It seems the obedient “good girl” persona, who fails to self-advocate, shows up time and again. In this case, she morphed into a compliant patient mask from the start of my ordeal, listening to doctors and their decisions without consulting with my inner voice first. The case with the botched biopsy is a good example. My intuition spoke the very first time the haematologist brought up the question of a second biopsy. There was queasy flutter in my stomach. My chest constricted. I felt *short of breath*. Yet, I did not voice my apprehensions; I did not ask if there was an alternative method. And there was: a PET scan. It is also the time when I was offered help and did not receive it because I was responding from an ingrained belief that I needed to be strong. A false belief, of course, but one that keeps informing my relationships with family and friends.

The truth is: I need all the help I can get because I cannot walk the end-of-life path alone. And maybe this is also the purple turkey’s medicine: to learn to ask for help and be grateful for receiving it. According to King, turkey as a spirit guide teaches one how to connect to others and believe in oneself. Isn’t that the truth? Acknowledging I need help, that I want the support of my family and all my friends, reaching out and accepting their offerings, reciprocating with gratitude for what they bring to my life is what I am learning through the present travel across the underworld. But, this is not all.

The Turkey is associated with the Fire element: creation and destruction, again. Athena and Medusa, unified. Passion and creativity freely flowing outwardly. On a personal level, I have to continue connecting to my creativity, perhaps by spreading it around; my legacy and offering to the world is an attempt to pay back what has been given to me. I am at a crossroads: my time may be limited, I don’t know yet how long, and that begs for consideration of what I want to do with the time I have. What direction is my life taking? I know I want to pursue the healing / healer path. It is a sacred, mysterious path as well, reconnecting me with my “original instructions” (Bernard, 2023). Spreading what I have learned from my journey, sharing it with my son first.

As King acknowledges, becoming an emissary for Fire, a “life and death” element, is a task for the wise and brave souls. I have to muster the courage to make the changes I need to make in my life, so I can live my depths! Get out of my shell, reveal the iridescent pearl of my being. Staying centered and grounded but also experiencing my vulnerability with self-compassion and non-judgment. Presently, this teaching and turkey medicine seem the most relevant, as it is precisely what I am trying to do: staying centered and grounded. Close to Earth and the living rock of my being. Not doubting myself. Cultivating my inner resources. Taking care of my bodymind and soul. Growing. Learning. Cherishing. Grateful. Ironically, turkey is an animal unifying the messages of Mother and Father. According to King, my inner Mother advises me to stay grounded, while my inner Father supports me by reminding me to “walk with honour, respect, and gratitude as guides.”

My disembodied vessel has been unloved for too long, and now the purple turkey image brings hope that I can change my relationship with my physicality by focusing on self-care and reclaiming my wholesome *yin* energies. What do I want? Peace of mind, contentment that comes from following my passions, and much beauty, which brings me back to the association of turkey with fire and creativity.

To wake up untethered
in a place of warmth and calm
a mind not racing to another dark thought

feeling the wind in my face
gusts of dust brushing against naked skin
raising a hand to greet

a field of wild daffodils
tiny sun-kissed dots in a carpet of green

looking at a sky of bright open
lines stretching my soul
to the skyline's end

a life painted in a dream
of my choosing

left in a jar
the lid tightly sealed
undone

In this line of thought, my purple turkey reminds me of the sacrifice the spirit animal embodies as we serve her on the table on Thanksgiving Day. Bernadette King tells a story explaining why the bird has such a long neck. Here I recall it so the connection to the previous musings is strengthened.

The earth was flooded and all living beings had to escape. Turkey helped everyone and left last to find a higher ground. Before she fled the fast-approaching raging waters, she stuffed her feathers with seeds and pods so that they could be replanted on a safer ground. Turkey, at the time could talk, just like humans. She asked for help when her heavy body, full of promise for new life after the flood, began to drown, for the destructive waters caught up with her. Because Turkey hid her load in the feathers, those who saw her struggling accused her of being selfish, seeing she carried nothing with her. To save herself, Turkey stretched and stretched her neck, and kept swimming as fast as she could. When finally the spent bird reached safe land, covered with mud and debris, she still faced the accusations of those who refused to help her. With whatever energy she had left, then, Turkey shook her feathers, and from there the plant seeds and pods she had treasured, rained on the soil. She suddenly became a saviour of the world, and those who wrongfully accused her of being selfish, now begged for forgiveness. But Turkey could not respond because, in her efforts to stay above water, she had stretched her neck so hard, her vocal cords ruptured.

The story seems to bring together the key ideas I associate with my purple turkey doodle. She represents one of the aiding healing animal energies on my journey, constantly reminding me that I have all I need to walk any path with humility, but also courageously and gracefully, with dignity, pride, and content. Sacrifice, resilience, abundance, forgiveness, and gratitude are the turkey teachings, and the next section will attempt to tie the ends.

Whatever grievances I have had towards my parents, working them out in previous expressive landmarks has been helpful in changing the feelings of loss, deprivation, and the terror of physical annihilation, restoring a peace of mind that has allowed me to forgive myself, too. The Buddhist prayer of forgiveness, to which my therapist introduced me, has been a significant addition to the practices expanding my capacity to self-regulate and to bear the tensions, fears, and limitations to my existence that previously would have generated trauma responses. It is not that my body is constantly relaxed. Not at all. But, I have a choice when the stress response is noticed, a choice freeing me from dwelling in the darkness, not avoiding it, yet not fully letting it submerge me. Reinforcing the love and gratitude I have in my heart is most of the work I do now. What it boils down to is ‘counting the riches:’ what each day brings as small or larger gifts, knowing the treasures stored in my physical container, and recovering the sense of wellness that has always been there, at

my center. Memories of my safe places, conjuring up inner resources, trusting the unconscious to grant me what will serve my being at any given moment, so I can sustain my psychological and spiritual health. Beauty is a well-spring of awe and reverence: both necessary for my bodymind-soul care. In the process of forgiveness, the diverse and contradictory affects combine, entwine, integrate and evolve “into a new, broader and more realistic experience of self and Other” (Novakovic, 2023, p. 12).

The sacrifice of the “I” and the intellect, which is to take a role supportive of the being’s aspirations and passions, is welcomed. As part of my initiation, such surrender of mind to body, as the expressive landmark discovers, is obligatory. Medusa and Athena must come together, their energies interplaying in a consciously experienced psychological growth and emotional maturity. Yet, the mystery of the connection to the Transpersonal is retained, honoured, and celebrated. “[All] mysteries are really a movement from fear to joy” (Mozol, 2019, p. 63). The sacrifices are sacred. My funky purple turkey image incarnates the true meaning of sacrifice: “to make sacred, to make holy” (Feather, 2013, p. 336).

The healing track, following the dark feminine Medusa energies within me, is the reunion of body and intellect, of sensuality and reason, of intuition and will, of matter and psyche. I cannot connect to the web-of-Creation by means of a severed head alone. Living an embodied existence in relation to the Life forces and

the Great Mystery is a noble and fulfilling quest. There is no need to sacrifice the inner Medusa any longer, for she is the sensual energy of my feminine sensibility, offered in service to my bodyful being. The sacrifice of Athena is both empowering and humbling. The shield of reason still powerful but no longer required as armour. In fact, the fullness of being is the marriage of all aspects—“the many-sided feminine” (Brinton Perera, 1981, p. 19) holy manifesting.



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Expressive Landmark 24: March 30–April 14, 2023—The Ways of Water

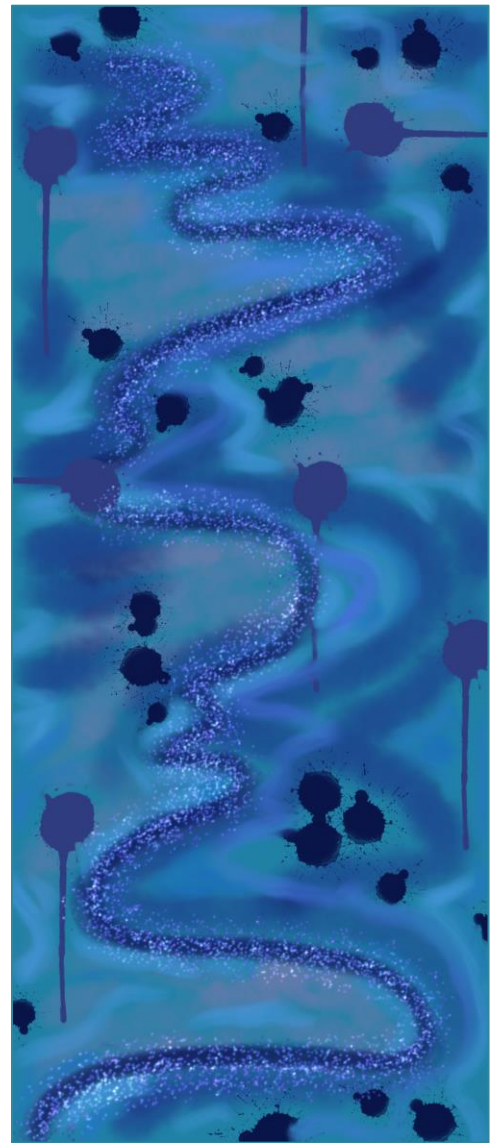
Lacourt's anecdote about her elder's suggestion to reflect on the image of water when she was distressed (2012, p. 66) invokes a powerful nonverbal way to tap into my own healing powers and, by way of wordless images, to re-connect with the inner child and the land.

My connection to water is archetypal. Mom's recall of the place she believes she conceived me—the Black Sea shore where my dad and she were vacationing nine months before I was born in May 1966—is the personal anecdote embodying it.

Reconnecting with Nature is healing (Jung, 2002; Naor & Mayselless, 2020).

March 29, 2023: Journal entry

My body craves the sun, the ocean (sea!), the breeze, so I am assuming, it is the experience of wholeness not simply via the womb-waters, but also the content and carefree state of my younger self, playing in the sand on the Black Sea shore, which we visited every year since, apparently, even before I was born. It is the place of my origins—both literal and archetypal. The energy of Sand shows up as the background colour in the doodle I did today with my non-dominant left hand, which turned out to be a ram: an Aries solar symbol (the zodiac sign of my husband and son), which also encloses the head of a lioness, a totem animal of the goddess Cybele. I don't know much about this deity, but the consciousness of the Felidae family is with me in our home. Helix, our cat, who is the source of healthy yang energy in my life, in my re-mythified personal healing journey, stands for the double helix—DNA—twinning, doubling, joining, linking. I am a Gemini. The pairing of energies, the dynamic of opposites in tension yet balancing, moving and fluid: sun, sea, sand—the points where egg & sperm united to create me—a new life, mother's and



Balinska-Ourdeva. (2023, November 11). *The Way of Water* [Digital art].

father's offerings, both blessings and afflictions, as my current health issues physically manifest. Yes, my body longs for the Sun, the Sea, the Wind, Plants, Trees, Animals, Birds, Sand/ Soil, upper world and underworld. I want to reconnect with Nature and my true nature, the healing powers within and without.

Nature speaks to us symbolically through synchronicities. The unconscious mind is our way of understanding Her language.



Balinska-Ourdeva. (2019, March 28). *My Birthplace*
[Acrylic painting].

Meditations on Water: In Dialogue with Lao Tzu

The supreme good is like water,
which nourishes all things without trying to.
(Lao Tzu, 1988/2006, chapter 8)

Do you have the patience to wait
till your mud settles and the water is clear?
(Lao Tzu, 1988/2006, chapter 1)

Response to Lao Tzu

1. murmurs—

the river flows upward;
against the stream,
i listen to salmon
making the journey back
(Balinska-Ourdeva, 04-02-2018)

tears salty and sparkling
like a glass of wine
gently swirling
dancing encircling

the embers
of a new passion
(Balinska-Ourdeva, 28-06-2018)

2. a wave coming to shore
rests

in her palms sea shells
gather
fragile
and wet

3. sunlight inside light
the dark place known intimately
i choose to walk differently
into sunrise
(Balinska-Ourdeva, February, 2020)

4. Round Wave Breath

salty taste,

tangy lips
drops splashing,

briny smell,
welcoming

merging

& emerging

from the ocean,

embraced

infused & ancient,

(Balinska-Ourdeva, 14-03-2023)

Karmic eddies (Meacham, 2020, pp. 264-265)

Karmic eddies are places of important learning. We move our life force into holding patterns along the stream of our river of life to attend to hurts, complexities, sacred missions and growth opportunities. Often, karmic eddies are unfinished business that we brought with us into this life, or things that happened to us that are out of our control. ... While karmic eddies have an important place in our development as souls, it is also important to learn to complete them and call the energy of these eddies back into the river of our lives.

November 11, 2023: Journal entry

I have reached an eddy. Swirling in my own fluid, my right lung is active. A spot. What it reveals to the medical professionals is not what it reveals to me. Learning to turn helplessness into help, the mark of the current transformation requires that I sit in the mud until the water clears. A swishing, splashing, softly rubbing liquidity liquidating remnants of unresolved trauma, inherited directly from both my father and my mother. When my dad was young, probably three or four, he almost drowned in the brook in front of their house. His oldest sister saved him, but the fear lodged in his body, most likely in the lungs, for my dad instinctively would have held his breath to prevent water coming into his airways. To this day the tension, constriction, and suffocation the cells of his body store.

Recently, I also learned that my mom, too, has had a near-death-experience, almost drowning in the Black Sea when I was thirteen or fourteen years old. By chancing on a low spot, she was caught in a rip current, which carried her away from the shore, deeper into the open sea. She did not tell me how she survived, but I image the terror she must have experienced. Facing her own Gorgon and saying “No” to Death, she must have felt completely helpless and powerless. Whether she was saved or had the presence of mind to save herself, I don’t know. But, as my dad’s, her trauma response, through the sperm and the egg, transferred into my bloodstream and body, my own encounter with Death augmenting it further.

The journey to embark on is facing the fear of Death, learning to seek help, and to trust my intuition. It is not the first time these teachings have been offered to me. Recently, I dwelled in the helplessness the second, botched biopsy provoked. I surfaced with the assistance of the purple turkey image and the heartening energy she roused. I think about the connection between mud (clay soil) and water: two elements most profoundly representative of Mother Earth. My weak ties to her are becoming clearer as I notice the lack of her presence in my Life. I have not been in nature since my trip to Пирин планина in the summer during my visit to Bulgaria. The same place: Добринище. The same mountain, this time touring it briefly with a guide, a local person who takes care of sacred buildings honouring Church-venerated saints and patrons, most notably Свети Димитър Солунски and Свети Георги Победоносец, considered in Bulgarian folklore to be twin-brothers, both warriors and protectors.

January 9, 2024: Journal Entry

A familiar presence, the wind, his song wooing and twirling. He touches inside the lungs, pushing down to the belly. I expand with his wing-hurting flight, shifting from stasis to movement. I dance. The pine trees sway gently, the wind’s deep bass voice rushes through their needles, making a brittle yet intensely vibrating sound. I listen. Hwoo-woo-woo. Hwoooo-woo-woo. Fffush. Fffjuush. Hwo-woo-woo. Hwoooo-woo-woo. The melody is simple yet full bodied.

Staying with the wind, feeling him swirl inside me stretches my body sideways, backward, below, and above, gluing me to the ancient landscape where I stand. Mountain Пирин sings. The wind sings. My skin sings. My hair sings. Under my feet, the pine needles are both crunchy and soft. A paradox, really. I step forward gingerly, my parents just a few strides ahead. Light and sinewy, my body floats as the wind brushes against my clothes, naked arms, the skin prickling, eyelashes fondled, my entire being goosebumpy as my legs slide forward effortlessly. I glide. I am the wind's dance partner. Inner energy pulsates with every wind-rush, with every step. My body remembers the wind, the fresh resin smell, the pine forest talking in deep, resonant voices, whispers of past, present, and future, ancient ancestors I don't know, embodied in the mountain's song whose otherworld beauty the national poet Hristo Botev captures in this verse: "Настане вечер, месец изгрее, / звезди обсиная свода небесен, / гора зашуми, вятър повее, / Балканът не хайдушка песен" (The moon comes out and day grows dim, / on heaven's vault the stars now throng, / the forest rustles, quiet stirs the wind, / the mountains sing an outlaw song) (Botev). I am home.

What is the holding pattern here? What am I holding onto? It seems it is a belief, a rigid, firm, obstinate belief, not allowing me to trust what is beyond my "I"-logos-scientific-educated-mind. Energy medicine, vibrations, healing through alternative states of consciousness. Trusting in the helping presences and the healed outcomes that are already there. In this life. On this path. Having faith in the unfolding of my journey, in my inner strength to carry on the battle with physical and psychological monsters. In the cave. In the underworld of trauma (Salter-Kelly, 2021). For now, I stay with the mud and wait for the water to clear, my consciousness to settle into knowledge that comes not from the rational mind because, as Sarah Salter-Kelly writes in her book *Trauma as Medicine*, the rational mind cannot understand trauma.

As I stay with the image of water, two memories surface.

The first image is fluid and strong. I am at the University of Alberta's West end swimming pool. It is four o'clock. After a day of intense reading and writing, I dip my body in the water carefully so to savour the transition from solid to weightless state more mindfully. The smell of chlorine tickles my nostrils. I adjust my goggles and look around. There is no one in my lane. I step forward, feeling the water's resistance. My feet sturdy, planted on the swimming pool floor. The water is a bluish shade, the tiles lined up like army soldiers standing at attention. I dip again, and the water folds around me. It is pleasantly cool on my shoulders, silky on my skin. This time, I reach out my arms and let go off the floor. I am afloat. My torso is buoyant, the water, like mother, gently cradling my form. I feel strong, alive, energetic. I push forward in a powerful breaststroke. Focused and determined, sleek like an eel, flowing and lithe, oozing with health, I glide effortlessly toward the pool's distant end.

The other memory recollects a trip to a lake somewhere in Alberta. It is a lake my husband, my son, and I visited many years ago. I don't know its name. I cannot remember the details of our trip. Yet, the way the water sparkled when the sparse sunrays hit it I recall vividly. The cool air crisp and smooth as we watch people enter the water on canoes and boats. Tall pine trees all around, colouring the surface a dark-grey-green glowing shade. An overcast sky. My memory weaves a tranquil and nourishing tapestry I can think of while the procedure to drain the right lung fluid lasts on Thursday, November 16, 2023. Liquid helping liquid. Emptying. Cleansing. Maybe I need to sit next to a lake. Maybe this is the flowing presence to carry me through and past the current ordeal.

The healing power of water comes to me also through the image of my great-grandmother, the healer. She would fill an empty lemonade bottle with water, herbal medicines infused in the liquid, which was probably also strengthened energetically with her own unique magic to help someone in need. I don't know the details of the treatment. I remember my great-grandmother rolling the medicine filled bottle on the floor of the room in the country house where the hearth was, following it with carefully placed steps. Three times. Three times. Three times. Circling and whispering to the four corners of the room, to the four directions of the world. Sending her messages, or prayers, or intentions for restoration and wellness. I know I have researched the incantations before, but my memory has retained none of the words. A gap in my history that could be mended, but I have to travel to Bulgaria for that. Once the ceremony is performed, the person seeking my great-grandma's help would drink the water as directed. To cleanse. To replenish. To find the way through the mud to the clear water. To settle into health.

How do I access the healing powers of water today? This week? In preparation for the procedure whose name I don't know yet; what is my connection to water so I can learn from Her way?

Fluid to fluid. According to the Cleveland Clinic's website, the lymph—a watery liquid moving through the lymphatic system—collects fluids from body tissues and returns them, purified, to the blood. This exchange of fluids: nutrients in, harmful substances out, maintains a balance. What is more important, lymph forms from blood plasma. So, a connection between the CML and my swollen lymph nodes physiologically makes sense. How are the two systems intertwined, and what does it mean for digging up the roots of my dis-eases, leading back to the imbalance of my relationship with mom and dad? Their absences, their traumas, passed down onto me; my personal emotional upheavals and stresses over the years further exacerbating these. Perhaps, it is the imbalance of their relationship that I have replayed in my life. The betrayal trauma, its chemicals still

lingering in my nervous system because the processes of forgiveness are not quite yet complete. And the guilt that another expressive landmark explored.

The CML is a slow killing disease, which probably started developing decades before it was detected. But my body held the fortress, protecting, working hard to repair. Now tired. Now overwhelmed. Now weakened. The fleshly stronghold still responds but in dangerous ways. My cells have gone rogue. They have gone wild. I doubt this is the wild woman Clarissa Estés (1995) writes about, or is she? The archetype with many faces has shown repeatedly in later years, the most recent manifestation: the Gorgon, the topic of the preceding healing soul-song track.

The way of water is patience. She erodes rocks; she wears away the most stubborn substances, turning them to sand and dust. The teachings of water are about endurance, persistence, and humility. Water is humble. She strives for the lowest place; close to the Earth, gravity pulling her down. She gives us the most evened out spot to live: sea level. We measure both elevation and depth from the ocean's imaginary surface line. The sea level is a boundary and a starting point. At sea level, I return to myself. Out of the cave. Up the mountain, which is a symbol of Cybele as well. Черно море and Пирин планина emerging in this song as the two locations where I feel connected to Earth Mother, to the Life force, to the elements, and the Great Mystery, to the lifeblood of my being.

Cybele's myth emphasizes the importance of connecting to Nature and inner nature when facing the difficulties of Life, more specifically, the "shadow of death" (Alvar & Gordon, 2008, p. 71). A predecessor deity to Cybele is Angdistis, an Anatolian mountain goddess invoked together with other healing or savior deities (Alvar & Gordon, 2008, p. 246). Cybele's festival was celebrated between April 10 and April 14 in ancient Rome and replayed the betrayal trauma the goddess and I experienced—the infidelity of her consort, Attis, with his consequent castration and diminishment of sexuality, yet also resurrection. The infidelity of my husband did not produce the drastic consequences Attis suffered, but my rage, deep hurt, the stamp of the unbearable feelings, most of all, the fear of abandonment—a threat of seismic proportions, given the previous history of abandonment trauma, were no less intense and greatly archetypal. Here, Cybele's myth helps me to reconnect with extremely powerful inklings to reject patriarchal norms that have dictated my life to this point: obedient daughter, devoted wife, nurturing mother, reclaiming the "wild woman" inside. But, it is a transition and transformation commanding patience. And so, the ways of water and the cycles of rock formation are appropriate therapeutic explanatory metaphors.

Becoming stone: Meeting the Sarsen Woman

Earth's internal heat and processes happening on the planet's surface, which solar energy drives, are crucial for the crystallization of hot magma into cold stone (Earle, 2015, p. 56-57). Water, ice, wind, and other elemental forces are important in the formation of stones in two other ways: minerals in sand grains, clay, and so on, layer one on top of the other, and the piling up creates pressure on the lower strata, which then turn into stone. The processes, of course, are much more complex and various, but for the purposes of this expressive landmark, I am referring to information simplified and aligned with the metaphor's primary goal: to illustrate my psychological sedimentation and the formation of the living rock of my being.

Sediment stones develop on ocean floors, beaches, in rivers and deserts (Kirk, 2018). And they change through further erosion and re-erosion when lifted up from the depths. Or they are buried deeper into the Earth's crust, changing into metamorphic rocks when heated, squeezed, and thus altered (Earle, 2015, p. 57). Finally, metamorphic rocks appear when the conditions drastically vary, and an existing stone becomes hotter, more compressed, or mingles with new minerals dissolved in groundwater (Earle, 2015, p. 57), a process truly capturing the way my identity changed when I moved from Bulgaria to Turtle Island-Canada. A part of my previous 'I' still alive but no longer carrying the same beliefs, my entire outlook altered, and so a new person emerged under the metaphorical pressure of having to adjust to a different environment and lifestyle. The new minerals—my lived experiences on the Turtle Island-Canada terrain—added to an older stony core (Kirk, 2018). My current health ordeals offer new opportunities for the living rock of my being to transform once more. By way of petrification or lithification? I am curious to witness.

The transmutation of liquid to solid (hot magma to hard rock), or from water dissolved minerals into new solidified form, and the sedimentation, too, are fascinating processes to imagine; the time it takes for a rock or stone to form and change—mindboggling. I am experiencing the processes of lithification (expelling fluids) literally, as my right lung produces excess fluid, accumulating between the pleura and the chest wall. It certainly signals imbalance, my life energy's disrupted flow, the psychological, identity, and existential implications of which I am yet to understand.

Petrification, which I wrote previously about, and lithification: I don't know what role each one plays, but both are junctures where inner nature and Nature intertwine.

And here, I reach the intersection where the Sarsen Woman, an inner figure I described originally in 2014, offers her help. She is a presence I initially felt when I was researching and writing an assignment for a university graduate class, introducing me to Jung's depth psychology. In the past, I penned:

An image came: I saw myself in a cast covering my entire body, constrained as if in a coffin. I could move my arms, but I did not want to. I lie there: a corpse yet alive.

Something seems to be dead in me, as the image suggests. The inner child is so deeply repressed that I feel as if she is dead. But I caught a glimpse of her today because, even though the adult in me judged her, she smiled. Still, I am a mummy trapped in a sarcophagus. This is my body. Stone-like. Confined. Neglected. Forgotten. There are no voices. No noise. I am alone and scared, but not lonely. I don't seem to want to break out. I just lay there. I wait.

*Another image also came: I saw what my 'altar' representation would be. It is the opening of a mountain cave. A heart is placed in its center. The photograph of me at the end of grade one is within the heart. On the picture, my grandmother stands diagonally from me to the right, in the back row. Mayan symbols are etched on the sides of the mountain, but I will not include them in the actual artwork. Because I cannot draw, I will ask my son to help me. In my vision, there is an arrow pointing from *сmapumaïka* to me.*

An imaginal dialogue with the palm houseplant: Seeking my grandmother's voice

Where have I travelled?

The palm answers in whispers I cannot comprehend.

*Why can't I hear the voice of *сmapumaïka*?*

The guilt is strong. You were not there when she died. She was shy and quiet when she was alive.

Palm, I ask, how does one know how to talk to the dead?

In that there is a danger. Their words come from a place where the roots are. You might mishear them. They speak like grass, like leaves rustling. Wind carries their words in gentle swaying waves.

How deep go the roots?

To the other side of the world, through the cave of imagination. You return to that image and the feeling of black.

My grandma, I cannot feel her. Does she want to speak with me?

The palm answers quickly: you feel her in me. Each houseplant you have, when you remember to water it, answers with the voice of your grandmother. You have to learn to

listen. To offer attention.

*My house does not feel like a home.
Palm, where is my home?*

In forgetting to water your plants, you forget your roots. The connection is thin. You need to dig deeper, to cut loose, to bury and so to revive. Cuttings grow from the dead branches, stretching down in order to rise up.

You have to find the Sarsen Woman, the energy that can guide you back home.

Веси, добре дошла. Пак сме на село в лятната кухня.

Леглото до стената, вратата откряната. Старитатко и старимайка лежат. Той е заспал, будна е тя. Може би не е истински спомен, но аз разпознавам тишината която ни обгръща. Когато се върна в България това лято ще посетя вечното им жилище и ще поставя цветя върху надгробните камъни.¹

¹ *"Welcome, Vesi!"* (the Sarsen Woman's voice, in italics, I confused with my Grandmother's voice, or maybe they overlap?). The normal font represents my younger self, speaking. *"We are at the country house again.* The bed along the wall, the door partly opened. Grandfather and grandmother rest. He is asleep, awake is she. Perhaps it is not a real memory, but I recognize the silence, which shrouds us. When I go back to Bulgaria this summer, I will visit their graves and lay flowers on the tombstones."

The Sarsen Woman visited me again when I began writing a scholarly article in 2022. It is about a young, fifteen-years old Caucasian boy, who encounters Death for the first time and is traumatized. Rocks are an important motif in Doris Lessing’s short story “A Sunrise on the Veld,” featuring the adolescent protagonist, so when I began researching, I knew I had to look more deeply into the symbolism of the image and amplify its archetypal meanings. I have not finished the research nor the writing, but the most recent encounter with the Sarsen Woman, when she actually showed me her face, is worth recounting because it also exemplifies the changes that are happening within me, pointing to a new consolidation of psychic structures to form the stone center of my currently nascent being. The tectonic plates of my personality shifting. The pressures of the unconscious working, and then, the forces of the planet’s elements acting on the surfacing sediments. The rock cycle and hydrological cycle in full force.

Again, an assignment I was completing for a graduate course on expressive processes as trauma-sensitive practices stirred the Sarsen Woman energy and led to her representation. I was asked to collect stones with noticeable lines on their bodies and arrange them by connecting the lines to form a shape. A spiral, a word, or another being could emerge. I was expected to take pictures of my creations. I did four different rock arrangements, each one establishing a path to the Sarsen Woman, who showed up last.

I don’t know the names of the stones I collected from our back yard, but the pattern, I immediately recognized as my inner figure, an alter ego of sorts, which has lain dormant in my underground psychic recesses. I felt more than just a symbolic amplification was needed in this case since the presence I intuited was weightier and more ancient compared to any other inner figure I have previously explored. In short, I needed assistance connecting with her and asked a shaman,



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2024, April 8). *Sarsen Woman-An Alter Ego* [Foraged art photograph].

who my therapist recommended, to guide me through to and channel for me the messages the Earth energy was revealing. The following journal excerpts recount my first shamanic journey in more detail.

April 16, 2024: the Sarsen Woman's gifts

The journey begins underground, in an earth-covered room, like a basement, or perhaps a stonewalled cellar, similar to the one in my great-grandmother's house. There is a window high above. I inhale the rich scent of freshly dug soil. Then, I go through a passageway, exiting into a forest clearing. The full moon casts her silver-pearl light. I am in a meadow, covered with blooming wildflowers. I wear a dark wool dress, worn-out because I am poor. I am fourteen years old. I stand in the meadow for some time before I see the statue, like an obelisk, with the Sarsen Woman's face looking at me from above: she is so tall! My intuition tells me I am somewhere in England, or Scotland, or maybe even at Stonehenge (?).

I ask the Sarsen Woman who she is, and she tells me she is my mother because I am from the Earth, and the Earth is I. She answers affirmatively that she is my protector. And also tells me I have to get back to my roots, the root of my being: sun, water, wind, and stones. I need these. But the journey shows me the importance of another elemental force: fire, because, next an image from deep inside my pelvic cavity surfaces once the shaman asks me what emotions I feel. Anger, no, actually fury, originating in my vagina—a rage for being raped when I was twenty years old. The experience, however, does not feel mine but that of my biological mom. Five days later, she confirms my vision's truth during our regular Sunday video-chat.

The next image is disturbing but not painful. I am standing at a stake, all around me a tall and thick wall of dry hardwood eager to burn. The flames engulf me, yet I don't feel the heat. Rather, the fire, its ferocious wild blazes, burn down only the anger. When the flames die, I am left naked, my feet covered in ashes. At that moment, a huge raven appears, flapping his enormous wings. He guides me to a beautiful mountain where I stand at the foothill of a rocky, snow-covered peak, emanating light in all directions. Immediately after, I am back in the clearing, facing the Sarsen Woman once more. She tells me I must continue to write and to have faith.

My logical, scientific-molded and skeptical mind has no explanation, and I cannot rationally make sense of the vision, but the light the mountain radiates is calming. To trust, the Sarsen Woman says. I need to trust, but I forget what I am to trust. Yes, I also remember hearing her laugh when I ask her how to believe in her truth. The journey lasts close to an hour, and the vision that impressed me the most is the raven. But, I have established a connection with the Sarsen Woman. She gifts me inner peace and a lot to ponder for the next while.

Maybe it is the zoom setting, too. I don't do well in online sessions, so definitely ... the experience is not what I expected even though I had no idea what to expect. Stones ... finish the article ... have a stone and ask questions of it, the shaman repeats. Then, she advises me to thank the Sarsen Woman and give her a stone as a gift. I remember the rose quartz I put in my amulet pouch, and offer it to her. Surprisingly, I see in my mind's eye the stone and feel it cradled in the center of my palm. I repeat the words the shaman feeds me. And then, with her help, I am back in the room, sprawled on my bed, at once believing and disbelieving what had just occurred.

The Sarsen Woman is a protectress.

April 17, 2024: the Sarsen Woman's gifts (continued)

Returning to yesterday's multiple realities experience, a new sensation and an unbidden image appear in my upper abdomen and lower lung. Today, I discover the reason: the lung cancer has metastasized to the pancreas. The red-hot sensation is located in my vagina again while a dark viscous, tar-like fluid oozes into my right lung and pancreas, and below it, I discover wrath, and underneath it—fear. Fear of what? At the bottom, beneath the fear, there is only darkness. Then, I see myself once again standing in front of the Sarsen Woman in the meadow, the blazes crackling around me, licking the fury away, decimating it, also turning the tar-like liquid into ashes. Fire fights fluid. Exterminates. Destroys. Obliterates. The image is sharply vivid, but I do not feel harmed, despite the complete eradication of the black liquid and the anger, leaving only ashes when the flames die.

What does the vision tell me about my lung cancer? What does the Transpersonal message me by way of the unconscious? Maybe I need to ask the Sarsen Woman these questions. But an inkling of an answer I already have: my mom's sexual assault, resulting in suppressed rage, the man who did it, unknown to me. Her secret carried throughout her life, clogging her body with a plethora of hurtful emotions, turned toxic, and manifesting in her physical ailments. Her life-defining trauma, stamped on my cells three years before I was born.

Today, I remember the shaman told me to choose a stone because it was my way of connecting with the Sarsen Woman. Is it a new stone I have to find, or could it be one of the stones I have already gathered from our back yard?

Ceremony: I am grateful to the Sarsen Woman for showing me her face, for her wisdom and guidance. She offers her higher knowledge ... now and in the future. THANK YOU!

April 17, 2024: Time travel and ancestral bloodlines

As I am making the bed, more details of the narrative behind my multiple realities experience surface. First, the girl I am in the trance-like state is a poor peasant. Her mother was burned as a witch somewhere in Scotland. The time period—14 to 16 century CE. Not entirely historically accurate, but because I was reading and writing about the patriarchal overtake and dethronement of the Great Goddess, the unconscious likely produced images resonant with the imaginal field I was immersed in. Yet, I also felt that I, too, was burned at the stake. The vision of the young woman engulfed in flames likely represents my mother's and my anger-rage, held in our bodies from past and present hurts, which the shaman invited me to completely eradicate—so graphically vivid! So real! Maybe it is true that sometime in a past life, I was burned as a follower of Hekate, a witchdoctor, perhaps even a midwife. I don't want to believe; yet I believe. Fascinating and frightening at the same time.

May 1, 2024—Solastalgia and reconnecting with Earth

The encounter with the Sarsen Woman continues to gift me insights into my physical illnesses, psychological and identity changes, and the larger ecological crisis the Earth faces. The notion of solastalgia (Albrecht as cited in Sweeny, 2022, p. 133-134) captures the interconnection between a terrestrial organism's suffering and the planet's distress. The author of the article applies the notion only to humans, but I intuitively sense the “eco-pathology” (Sweeny, p. 134) affects both human and non-human beings equally, for we are all related.

The deepest of my roots in this expressive landmark trace back to the formation of the Earth and her eternal wisdom, which over the millennia, since the evolutionary appearance of humans on the planet, has provided the “original instructions” how to live in harmony with Nature. I have no doubts the Earth is a living organism, our Mother, and as her children, we are meant to listen. Deep listening is a *yin* quality western education does not cultivate. But, this is not my point. In my dream state, I listen to the Earth's voice not with my ears, for I am asleep, but with my heart and soul since the physical dis-ease symptoms I am experiencing, especially the pleural effusion and the lung cancer, I intuitively know are related to the ecological crisis the Anthropocene has caused.

A synchronicity leads to the above realization. I wake up during the night, the power of the unbidden in-sight startling me: my lungs and the lungs of the Earth—the forests—are connected. Because of human activity, the terrestrial forests are unhealthy yet fighting intensely to rebalance the disruptions to the Earth's multiple rhythms and cycles, which maintain her life and the lives of every

other being she sustains. I recollect the words of the arborist who came to prune the back yard linden tree. He said the tree was distressed, absorbing too much nitrogen because of the drought we have experienced lately in Alberta and because our grass has been over-fertilized. In the semi-conscious state, the pieces click and propel me into a fully conscious state. Literally and metaphorically, I am awakened.

The words of the Sarsen Woman, that I am the Earth and the Earth is I, make perfect sense now: I feel the pain and hurt of the Earth's damaged lungs in my own right lung, adding an ecological layer on top of my father's trauma, which the CML and adenocarcinoma physically express. Emotionally speaking, the fluid accumulating in the pleura is fear, the lung being one of the internal *yin* organs according to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). In this belief system, the element of water is associated with fear, while the earth element is related to worry (Corso, 2023). My father's disturbed *yin* energies² because of his childhood encounter with Death have been passed onto me, settling into my lung, my life force further weakened because of my own encounter with Death so early in my existence.

To further illustrate the notion of solastalgia, I recollect another experience from not that long ago. I am driving to work. It is late winter. The skies are dark; the traffic is sparse. The sun has not risen yet, and I am alone. Suddenly, an overwhelming sorrow spreads across my chest, pressing mightily on my lungs, pushing the air out as tears begin to stream down. Gasping, ragged breaths, inconsolable sobs heave my breasts for no obvious reason. My grief is thick; its suffocating grip—a tight belt around my chest. Tight. Tight. Tight. I am short of breath.

Let me summarize my night vision's in-sight succinctly: my lung cancer has three origins—ecological, familial, and personal: the distress of Earth's forests, the emotional burden from my father's traumatic past, and the trauma response my own encounter with Death imprinted on my internal organ.

Another fact adds to the mysterious mix of experiences my rational mind struggles to comprehend. The very first time my oncologist and I met on January 10, 2024, after the usual courtesies, he said he had already seen two non-smokers with lung cancer within a couple of hours: another patient and I. Then, referencing recent medical literature, he noted that instances of non-

² The right side of the body is often regarded carrying father's energies (masculine), while the left side are inheritances the mother's (feminine) energies transmit. Although each person possesses both, my illnesses reveal the complex matrix of interdependent masculine and feminine energies I have absorbed from my parents.

smokers developing lung cancer have increased, but science has no explanation of the trend presently.

It seems clear to me, though, what the dream vision crystalizes: a truth I have intuited rather than cognitively known. My right lung adenocarcinoma is also a physical manifestation of the fear and grief my body holds because of the destructive effects of the human-made climate crisis. So, by walking the healing path, I may find a way to help others who suffer from similar symptoms. Unbidden images and symbolic amplification, expressive arting and listening to the Earth's messages, tracing trauma residue in the organs of the body: perhaps, these are the seeds to grow into a healing practice of my own making.

At this intersection on the SELF-PLACE matrix (Dowd, 2011, p. 141), the planet's hydrological cycle contributes further valuable details, aiding the construction of the extended therapeutic metaphors on this soul-track.

May 3, 2024 – The ways of water (continued)

Water constantly moves. By transporting sediments on Earth's surface, she nourishes. Fire (solar energy) evaporates water from the Earth's oceans, rivers, streams, lakes, the land, and the plants. Winds move water droplets through the atmosphere. Condensed in clouds, water in the form of rain or snow comes back from the skies to the soil. Water flows again through the Earth's surface and underground, finding her way back to the oceans. Moving through rock and superficial materials, water returns to her home, either directly or indirectly by way of streams, rivers and lakes (Earle, 2015, p. 350).

Life on Earth depends on water. And, our Mother knows how to store it in various reservoirs, making sure our terrestrial home is hospitable to all the living organisms she sustains.

Applied to my identity: the rock and the hydrological cycles symbolically enact the processes of my identity formation. I am a being both relatively stable (like rock) and fluid (like water). I am the product of geological time, but also of biological time. One is immensely slow, almost imperceptibly passing. The other is short and measured in human years. But my DNA keeps the records of all my previous transformations, the sediments of those changes building up, subject to physical and psychological pressures, and weathering by way of lived experiences and familial / cultural history. My body is subject to the Earth's rhythms and cycles because I am a terrestrial being.

As much a product of Nature as of nurture, it is the interrelatedness between inner and outer that has shaped me over the span of my life.

My teacher and my medicine, water. I turn to her so to learn how to be fluid, how to heal, nourish, regenerate, and persist. The ways of water teach me the web-of-Life's interconnectedness, interdependence, cooperation, and collaboration. The Earth's wisdom I can access by knowing her history, by adopting her consciousness, by giving thanks to her mutability, flexibility, cyclical and rhythmic processes. I feel her powerful *yin* energies coursing through me, and I know that solid and liquid are complementary opposites. My thinking profoundly changed, I intuit deep in my body the truth of what science tells me about the Earth's geological time, which apparently, most human beings do not understand.

Let me cite an example illustrating the misleading language we use when we talk about time because we measure it from a human point of view. But, time is not human bound. Cutting-edge physicists are changing their minds about time, and while my purpose here is not to go into depth about the paradigmatic / ontological shift (feels like a quantum leap!) I am experiencing, it is inevitably connected to the foundational beliefs, the living rock of my being, whose aspirations for thriving and growth I want to fulfill.

Steven Earle in his *Physical geology* textbook (2015) stops me in my tracks when I read the excerpt below. The limitations of my ordinary imagination: unnerving.

If all of geological time is compressed down to a single year, Earth formed on January 1, and the first life forms evolved in late March (~3,500 Ma). The first large life forms appeared on November 13 (~600 Ma), plants appeared on land around November 24, and amphibians on December 3. Reptiles evolved from amphibians during the first week of December and dinosaurs and early mammals evolved from reptiles by December 13, but the dinosaurs, which survived for 160 million years, were gone by Boxing Day (December 26). The Pleistocene Glaciation got started at around 6:30 p.m. on New Year's Eve, and the last glacial ice left southern Canada by 11:59 p.m. (p. 234)

Historical time, measured from humanity's finite vantage point, is not the Earth's time flow. The chasm, because of present-day humans' inability to embody somatically the planet's geological time, skews our capacity to imagine cosmic time, which another passage from Earle's textbook beautifully illustrates:

It is common for the popular press to refer to distant past events as being "prehistoric." For example, dinosaurs are reported as being "prehistoric creatures," even by the esteemed

National Geographic Society. The written records of our history date back to about 6, 000 years ago, so anything prior to that is considered “prehistoric.” But to call the dinosaurs prehistoric is the equivalent to—and about as useful as—saying that Singapore is beyond the city limits of Kamloops! If we are going to become literate about geological time, we have to do better than calling dinosaurs, or early horses (54 Ma), or even early humans (2.8 Ma) “prehistoric.” (Earle, 2015, p. 234)

There are, however, much more compelling accounts of geological, cosmic, and human historical time entanglement. It is the mythical time the creation stories of all cultures across the globe describe in their mythopoetic, symbolic language. The ancient Greeks called it *Kairos* and opposed it to *Chronos*, denoting the linear, sequential flow of time modern calendars and clocks measure. Attuned to the Earth’s cycles and rhythms: day and night, ocean’s high and low tides, yearly seasonal changes, the mythopoetic imagination profoundly grasps and communicates the interdependence, cooperation, co-existence, mutually beneficial interactions that drive terrestrial life in relation to the existing universe. And this is because the mythopoetic imagination adds one more necessary dimension: the connection to the Great Mystery and the cosmic web-of-Creation.

According to Jungian psychologist Jerome Bernstein (2005), borderline consciousness is merged with Nature and mediated by the Transcendent dimension (p. 34). I personally, prefer the term Transpersonal. My encounter with the Sarsen Woman during the shamanic journey is a personal example of the type of consciousness Bernstein talks about. What terms we use to label it is not important. Understanding the implications of its cultivation is. And, the next expressive landmark offers a reflection on the mythopoetic imagination my Turtle Island-Canada experiences have restored and birthed anew, forming the most recent metamorphic rock of the living stone of my true being.

Personally, nurturing my mythopoetic imagination helps me to reconcile my scientific-western educated logical mind and my intuitive in-sights. On this healing soul-song track, the palm’s voice restores the connection to my grandmother, my ancestral ties to plants by way of traditional Bulgarian pagan beliefs, while simultaneously allowing unconscious knowledge to surface from unknown depths, siphoning wisdom from the consciousness of rocks, water, plants, and the Earth Mother. If we can re-imagine the unconscious as “the plenitude of different kinds of consciousness, offering their epiphanies: minerals, plants, animals, planets, stars, galaxies” (Romanyshin as cited in Rugh, 2022, p. 75), my multiple realities adventure gifts me precious glimpses into my personal re-mythified history. The energy of the karmic eddy that kept me swirling in a turbulent flow regime

for many years, I now call back to the river of my life. It is worth reminding that eddies form naturally behind large emergent rocks in swift-flowing rivers (Wikipedia contributors). Across time-space, the river of my life carries me home, but there likely will be more eddies to form and teach me. Yet, in my body I know that after my encounter with the Sarsen Woman, I have landed Home: the source of my wellness and the transformed living rock of my true being.



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16 | MY ALLIES

Expressive Landmark 25: March 29, 2023

“Re\balancing Reverie”



hand-flowing
image-forming
inward

draw_[n] \out
 $\xrightarrow{\text{reversed}}$ $\xleftarrow{\text{desrever}}$
 deserving

desert | **sur** **faced**
19000

animal spirits
frivolously
liquefying

opposites

Sun > fuelled
yang energy

Moon < nourished

yin counterpart

Balinska-Ourdeva. (2023, March 29). *Hailing the Animal Spirits*
[Digital art, non-dominant hand].

I draw the image with my non-dominant left hand, paintbrushes with an edgy feel on the Procreate app choosing me. I doodle, André Masson-esque style, and then look closely at what sur| faces. A more conscious re-articulation of an expressive impulse, the poem responds to what emerges. It is a ram’s head. Representing powerful *yang* energy, the drawing possibly symbolizes life-sustaining forces, freed from blockages, coursing through my body. They are not rebalanced yet, for the ram clearly dominates the image. The animal symbol also stands for my husband’s and my son’s

zodiac sign—Aries, corresponding to the first month of the Iranian *Hijri* solar calendar, one of the oldest in the world (Aries). Does the image prefigure new beginnings?

The ram is an ancient sacred and sacrificial animal. In my upbringing, the Golden Fleece and Medea story is the first myth introducing me to the meaning of the solar symbol. Activated, the Medea energy in my life heralds my displacement and betrayal trauma, a distressing cluster of emotional responses, which I have previously explored.

The larger ram shape is also a reminder to make the needed sacrifices so to metabolize my father's inherited *yang* energies, formerly shaping me because of my unconscious fusion with him. To recalibrate the over-identification with the inner Athena, too, means to offer my attention to the needs of my bodymind and soul instead. Establishing a healthy relationship with anger, aggression, violence, power, control, decisiveness and assertiveness is healing. Links to the creative "fire of fertility" (Smith, 2005), which the ram represents, suggest the wholing of Vessela. A new identity, rooted in my strong connection to the sacred feminine and the harmony of my being's physical, emotional, intellectual, and transpersonal aspects. The expansion of consciousness and psychological growth by way of attuning to the cosmic Life matrix sets a new orientation for my becoming. And so, the ram in the image signals my new passions and pursuits along with the energy to act on them. Helpfully, a Bulgarian mythological belief connects the ram with the moon as well. Represented with horns, in Bulgarian folk material and traditional creation stories of other Slavic people, the earth's satellite sometimes is perceived as a ram (Georgieva, 1993, p. 38). The image, therefore, portrays an archetypal pattern symbolizing power, arising from both *yin* and *yang* energies, synchronizing and collaborating to express aspects of my being once suppressed. It is a hopeful image, filling my heart with gratitude, reverence, and awe.

However, if one looks closely, and at the appropriate distance, a lioness' head is hidden within the ram. A symbol of the *Magna Mater*, the ancient Phrygian Great Mother goddess Cybele (Cirlot, 2001, p. 190), partly assimilated into Rhea and Demeter (Cybele), the subtle animal figure begs further amplification.

The background colour embodies the energies of Sand, a link I have mentioned before. To think of the desert is to remember the warmth of existence that is bare but essential. Reduced to grains of sand, a soul travels across the world, as in Lorna Crozier's poem "Sand from the Gobi Desert" (2005, p. 4). But there is more to the image. Desert life is very condensed (Estés, 1995, p. 53). Desert life commands restraint and patience. Desert animals preserve water and hold onto life unwearingly so to satisfy their thirst when an oasis appears amidst the sand dunes. Cacti wait to

bloom. “Most of what occurs [in the desert] goes on underground” (Estés, 1995, p. 53). Likewise in my life. Aspirations, desires, strivings, hopes, and visions live underground, beneath the perceptions of my conscious mind. A world reversed indeed as the life I live on the surface is limited compared to the richness of imaginative flights traversing the soil below the threshold of awareness. Sifting through the fertile subterranean ground is the goal of the current healing song, sounding like a roaring lioness or a hissing snake.

November 12, 2023: Journal entry

The image of the lioness in Nelson’s article (2021) has haunted me for a while. The dignity of the aging animal, preparing for her encounter with the Great Mystery, probably sensing what is to come and withdrawing from Life, yet not giving up on her journey because the time is not right: I welcome her today as I revisit the spontaneous image I created in March. “[H]osting living images in and with the body can be powerfully transformative” (Nelson, 2021, p. 46). The exploration here is about the allies—animal and otherwise—helping me on this new journey, the greatest of descents I have faced so far because I have to cope with fears my body has known unconsciously, their warning messages now taking physical form in the CML, sciatica, swollen lymph nodes, pleural effusion, and adenocarcinoma. A medley of invasive procedures and aggressive treatments puts a lot of strain on both psyche and soma, and invites me to sort out my medicines.

Learning to trust the spontaneous images my unconscious gifts me is at once daunting and exciting. Sitting with the companions who visit, gathering the helpers who come, asking for their help, in addition to allowing my family and friends to bear the burdens of what is to come, I open my heart and mind to the numinous experiences awaiting me as I proceed on this path.

The images here explored Nelson calls “dreamish,” referring to “dreamish time” (2021, p. 48)—receptivity to multiple coexisting worlds, present, past, and future simultaneously occurring. My connection to the sacred through unconscious images, entering daily life by way of colours, paintbrushes, or poetry enables me to become aware of beings from beyond the physical reality, from a place of knowing the rational mind cannot access. Intuition tunes in to what has been, what is, and what is to come.

I expect the meaning of these images will continue to unfold for many months ahead, perhaps, even years as Nelson testifies in her narrative about the lioness she encountered in South Africa. I also had a remote encounter with a pack of lionesses when my husband and I visited the country in 1995. The Kruger National Park granted us an opportunity to witness, in their natural habitat, the grace and beauty of the wild beings, righteously praised for their regal stature and patience. A repetitive theme: patience. Waiting. Holding. Staying with what arises. The pain and the

joy. The hope and the despair. The mystery and the clarity. The right time. The right action. The right decision coming from a felt sense of deep wisdom and understanding because the body says “yes.” Emanating Eros: love that is “without distance, without time, without fear” (Krishnamurti as cited in Nelson, 2021, p. 49).

And so, I reach out to my next ally for help.

May 19-21, 2023

Fullness in my stomach, slight pressure radiating toward the sides from the center just below the solar plexus, forming a ball in the middle, closing at the lower end of the sternum, golden-coloured, a source of intense but unidentified energy.



Balinska-Ourdeva. (2023, May 20). *Patience* [Oil pastels].

The image came last evening during a body scan and stayed with me throughout the night. Initially, the snake was jumping through a flaming hoop. But, as I drew the image, a coiled snake, placed amidst a raging fire, felt right.

The fire represents my center: the heart, burning with unrecognized until now passion, or maybe it is love, rekindling my self-compassion and compassion. Perhaps, it is even the connection to the Great Mystery, now becoming more important than the ego-pursuits once preoccupying me.

The whole image I associate with the betrayal of self and inattention to my needs, not knowing what these are, what I want, desire, and value. In short, it represents the shift from taking care of others to taking care of my being. It also represents guilt: the discomfort of doing something

against my deep values. My outburst in class the other day, asking students why they disrespected me, required inner energy, which on other occasions I would have suppressed because my inner critic would have scorned me. This time, the guilt quieted because I ignored the inner critic. He advised me to comply with expectations about my teacher-role, to be composed, kind, and patient with the students, but I did not listen to him. I knew my boundaries, and I asserted them, respectfully yet confidently.

The image epitomizes an inner conflict I have experienced frequently in the past. The fire of unrecognized inner strength offset by the guilt of betraying my being: both tie with the snake in the midst of a flaming hoop. My underused ability to stand my ground, to advocate for myself, to meet my own needs, to rebuild a trust with my deeper inner wisdom clash with the hold societal expectations and norms, ingrained in my consciousness since childhood, still have on me. The purifying fire of sublimated anger is the meaning of the image today (May 21, 2023).

The snake embodies rhythmic movement, some nameless inner force; she is a symbol of the essential paradox of Life (Cirlot, p. 2001, p. xlvi). She also represents the spiritualization of the inner force (p. liv) and is connected to dragon (p. 86). Being the embodiment of energy itself, the snake signifies purpose, an orientation to a given end (p. 163). But the snake is an ambivalent archetypal symbol. On one hand, she brings wisdom from the depths; on the other, she is an evil seductress (p. 286). The snake is a dual transpersonal presence mostly because the patriarchal gods and saints want her dead. Endorsing women's helplessness and need for being rescued, the legend of St. George and the dragon is one of the most popular versions of an abiding patriarchal motif. It is no coincidence that in the re-mythification of my story the reawakened energies of all three goddesses: Artemis, Hekate, and Cybele, but also the Gorgon, are associated with the snake (Cirlot, 2001, p. 286). And, it is no coincidence that these goddesses are manifestations of powerful but feared and reviled female drives for independence, self-reliance, and self-assertiveness.

"Animal endowed with magnetic force," symbolizing resurrection and strength (especially a coiled snake because the coils can be deadly), Gnostics related the snake to the spinal cord and spinal marrow (Cirlot, 2001, p. 287). Her sudden attack—a sharp, pointed, bolt-like self defense strike from a horizontally coiled position, simulates the way the unconscious expresses itself swiftly and unexpectedly, its decisive and frightening intrusions. My outburst in class the other day had the emotional tone of an Artemis complex: quick in her response to punish those who overstep her boundaries. The goddess is the inner strength and resilience, the indomitable spirit assisting me to lead a fulfilled life in unpredictable times. Artemis is also the goddess of inner reflection, helping me

to become aware of ethical principles more nuanced and complex than binary black and white notions of right and wrong, good and evil. These energies are what I need at this juncture to let the Life forces, swirling in the whirlpool of past, current and future hardships, flow back freely into the river of my life (Meacham, 2020, p. 265).

May 4-15, 2024

A year later, another amplification adds meaning to the Artemis energies helping me along this path of reclaiming inner power and strength. Artemis of Ephesus, an ancient city in present-day Turkey, which my husband and I visited in 2009, is known as a goddess who fell from the sky through a hole, just like the indigenous North American mythical Skywoman (Arneson, 2021, p. 38; Horn-Miller, 2016; Kimmerer, 2013). The matriarchal Amazon societies from Northern Africa worshiped Artemis of Ephesus in the bygone days (Arneson, 2021, p. 38). She predates the ancient Greek Artemis, the goddess of the moon, Nature, and the woods (p. 38). Why am I mentioning Artemis of Ephesus? Her energy clearly feeds into the inner figure of my Warrior-queen, presently defending my physical vessel against the onslaught of cells gone rogue, gathering all the healing energies my bodymind can muster to fight off the offenders. Though imaginal, inner figures have a real impact on my well-being, for the hole I have fallen in is a dark place indeed, and yet, “[d]uring the long dark night, there is always dream light,” which “unveils worlds never imagined” (Arneson, 2021, p. 40), powerful energies to cleanse and heal both bodymind and soul. They orient my re\mythifying journey because they restore “the connection to lost wisdom” and boost “the disconnect from imposed belief systems that limit [my] experience” (Arneson, 2021, p. 43).

The symbol of inner strength—the snake coiled on itself in a ring, rests in the lower part of the spinal cord, portending an ascending force rising up (Cirlot, 2001, p. 288).

The spinal cord connects body and brain. It is the conduit of nerve impulses from the sensory organs to the brain and from the brain to the entire body, carrying needed information so the physical vessel can perform its many functions and keep me alive. The spinal cord also controls reflexes. Considered from a psychosomatic perspective, the spinal cord is also the conduit of consciousness. Body and psyche connect by way of the nervous system. Forms of energy, the electrico-chemical signals travelling along the nerves of the central and peripheral nervous system, allow me to tap into the energetic fields of others and interact with them. According to Ueker (2020), the energetic fields were already present before I was conceived. And this makes sense, for my

parents' energetic fields were already there in the egg and the sperm that made me, the spinal cord, the brain stem, the primitive gut, and heart being the first organ-structures the embryo developed.

My bulging disc, causing the sciatica nerve injury, is in the lower lumbar (L5) and sacrum (S1) area, the energy or communication channel obviously blocked. Symbolically, the sacrum is the locus of my authentic identity and life purpose (Ueker, 2020). Over the years, other people's versions of who I should be have shaped me. For example, my mom's unfulfilled ambition to become a physician influenced my first conscious choice of a career. After high school, I wanted to study medicine, though I abandoned this path. In retrospect, I believe it was a wise choice because the standard medical training I would have received probably would not have agreed with my deep values. Instead, I became a teacher of language and literature. Initially, I practiced in Bulgaria; since 2001, I have been a teacher on Turtle Island-Canada land. It was a practical, not necessarily a soul-directed choice.

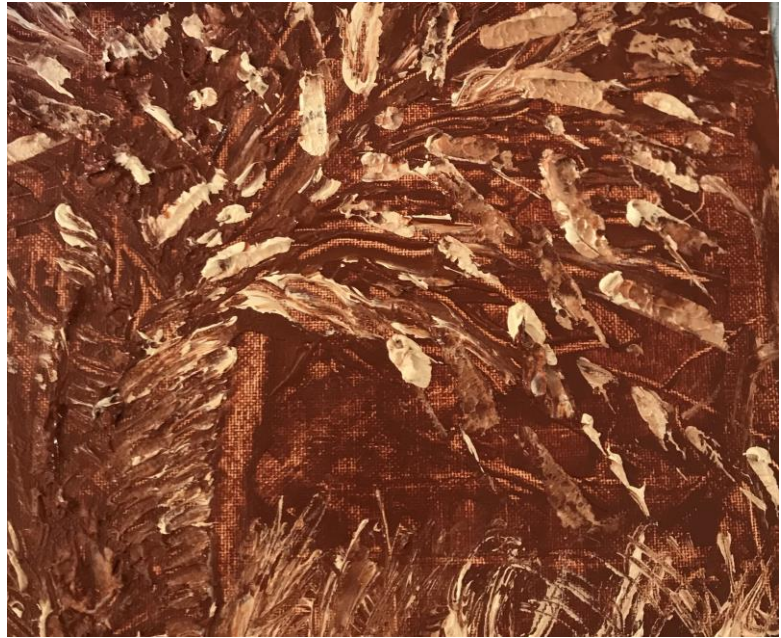
Identification with someone in the extended family is one of four unconscious themes the family constellation therapy postulates (Wolynn, 2017). I became a teacher, just like my grandaunt, even though she later changed her profession. Леля Кода also suffered from right side sciatica since she was seventeen. While my sciatica issues are likely the consequence of an old injury because I remember the nerve being aggravated when I was in my twenties, the tensions I have held in the lower back did not cause serious problems until my early fifties. Of course, I paid no attention to my bodyspeak when I was young. But my fleshly vessel kept sending me messages persistently.

Suffering from an illness or a symptom a member of my extended family has also been afflicted with is an invitation (Wolynn, 2017). I am not sure what triggered my grandaunt's neuropathy, but misalignment and chronic tightness in my lower back have stretched the nervous tissue, most likely causing the nervous cells in this area to transmit and receive altered information. Locked in communicating a particular emotion, like fear, shame or resentment, for example (Ueker, 2020), the muscles and nerves have stockpiled the disruptive pattern. I am about to explore the emotions my body has stored in this part, but a past visit to my bodywork therapist certainly indicated intense painful energy lodged here.

“...[W]e copy [from our human environment] ways of being (ways of vibrating) instantly and unconsciously through something called the *law of entrainment*. We adopt both the vibrational strengths and shortcomings from those around us” (Ueker, 2020). My grandaunt was my role model. I admired her authority, bright mind, decisiveness, and assertiveness. Her vulnerability, though, I consciously ignored yet unintentionally copied. My decision to become a teacher, like her, I now

realize is also an unconscious choice driven by a deferred sense of who I truly am and “adopting [an] identity that [has] kept [me] in the good graces of those around me” (Ueker, 2020). I wonder once released, what will the fiery-coiled snake make known?

A few years back, I thought teaching was my calling. I don’t think that anymore. So, the bulging disc and sciatica remind me of the “shoulds” regarding what I am to be and who I am to become, ruling my life up to this point. But no more. The snake hisses, ready to uncoil and unlock my inner strength, sensuality, and creativity, joy and pleasure flowing into my life, too.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2019, April 4). *Willow* [Acrylic painting].

The snake is an archetypal feminine symbol also connected to the tree (Cirlot, 2001, p. 288). My first shamanic journey revealed my profound connection to trees, particularly the willow and the oak, two fertile mythopoetic images. I painted a willow in 2019.

This year, the willow literally found me in my home when a dear friend of mine sent a bouquet, pussy willow branches gracing the flower arrangement with soft, furry, mother-of-pearl-coloured catkins. The willow twigs have recently developed roots. Now greening, their tender shoots vigorously grow into new offsprings held in a glass vase.

Additionally, on May 4, 2024 as I walked with another friend on a trail close to our house, a willow called out to me. I stopped to admire her pale-yellow, soft, and furry flowers, their spring-cheer swelling my heart with delight. I visit the willow tree regularly now, seeking a connection that soothes my pain and relights a child-like wonder and awe at the magic of Life’s resurrection.

Across the globe, various cultures associate *Salix* trees with the renewal of life within the web-of-Creation. Willow trees are sturdy yet pliant. Their roots are remarkably tough and readily sprout. And so, willow trees embody the resolve to live, also hiding precious medicine in their bark. Salicylic acid. Since ancient times, willow’s anti-inflammatory, analgesic, and anti-pyretic properties have been honoured and used in traditional medicine to treat colds, flu, rheumatism, and other

inflammatory conditions (Radovanović, Gavarić, & Aćimović, 2023, p. 8/17; Wikipedia contributors, 2024).

In Bulgarian folklore, the willow is a tree with ambivalent and complex symbolism. Both blessed and cursed, it is considered to be the first tree that ever existed. Grafting fruit-tree buds onto willows is a common practice because of the *Salix* trees robustness and endurance (Emilijanova, 2007, p. 39). Since the willow tree itself is not fruit giving, it ensures other trees' reproduction, and so, its dual symbolism is not surprising. Similarly to the snake, the willow is associated with light and darkness, harm and healing, death and life, mythologically alluding to the primordial, chaotic times when order in the world was established for the first time (Emilijanova, 2007, p. 40).

An old and a young willow have opposite functions. The aged and shrunken *Salix* trees host demons. Branches of young and vibrant willow tress, especially if blessed, protect against and obviate the ruinous effects of evil forces, natural disasters, and diseases. Human illnesses are transferred to withered willows with proper healing rituals (Emilijanova, 2007, p. 47-48). On the other hand, twigs from young, blossoming, and greening *Salix* trees symbolize fertility, regeneration, and renewal. Therefore, willow trees in Bulgarian folklore represent the Great Round and epitomize the cyclical processes of birth-growth-decay-death-rebirth. Associated with both the chthonic forces of the underworld and the fecundity of the upper world, willow trees mark the beginning of each new year and the seasonal rhythms of change.

The willow tree is also associated with the moon, sacred to both Artemis and Hekate (Haworth-Maden, 2018, p. 25). Flexible, yet strong, the willow in Taoism, a wisdom tradition I resonate with, symbolizes "strength in weakness," non-resistance, and bending with the forceful winds to withstand their powerful gusts that could break the tree easily if she were unyielding (Haworth-Maden, 2018, p. 25). The healing energy of the willow, thus, helps me stay strong yet vulnerable and accept what is to come, resisting not the unfolding of circumstances out of my control.

The willow is also a reminder that mourning the past is healing, but dwelling in it too much is detrimental to my psychological growth. Resurrecting the connection with the sacred feminine, the Earth's and the web-of-Creation's wisdom call for the old protective, trauma-laden beliefs-and-emotional patterns to be relinquished and replaced with new images, enhancing my inner strength, resilience, and rebalanced *yin / yang* powers. Restoring, regenerating, revitalizing my being as I wander the self-discovery and healing path. Life beckons me, time and again, to keep exploring what

awaits me with curiosity, patience, openness to the connection with the Transpersonal, and gratitude for the gifts it bestows on me.

Another archetypal image-gift from the unconscious serving a purpose similar to the willow is the oak tree. The first time my dream space swelled with an oak tree-image was in 2016. Here is an excerpt from my dream journal at the time.

March 29, 2016

Nothing but a calm feeling. A faceless man visits me, and we make love, but when I try to dialogue with the dream figure, he remains silent. My body, however, transforms into an oak tree. It looks like the old, gnarled tree from the TV show Game of Thrones. Solid, stable, deeply rooted in the earth. Enduring the whims of time and weather. I wish for the oak tree's wisdom.

Every day of this past week, I have asked for patience. And the unconscious bestowed on me the oak tree. It really strikes me as ancient. Leafless, the oak has eyes. They seem to be sad, deeply seated into the bark, among the wrinkles. In both the original dream and the active imagination amplification, I am younger, probably around twenty-two, the age when I got married. My hair is brown, not grey. And I appear to be carefree, not burdened by duties and obligations. Then, I notice that I am shape shifting—first, I become a sapling, then I turn into the oak tree. I am the oak tree. Between the two forms, I constantly oscillate. I wake up in the body of my younger self, the breeze playing with my hair. I am simultaneously the tree and outside of it. I stare at the oak tree intensely. I remember yesterday reading about 1000-year-old olive trees, uprooted from Italian soil and replanted somewhere else. Why? Feeling the olive trees' pain, I continue to gaze at the ancient oak tree my dream-eye holds in focus. No passion, no heat—peaceful and collected. Gentle and tender, soft lovemaking. This is strange.

May 18-June 2, 2024

Dreams are a powerful repository of insights into my psyche, but the oak dream-visit I have forgotten. The symbol did not show up again until my recent shamanic journey. My therapist asked me what vision of the Sarsen Woman I had, her look unintentionally displayed in the forged art piece already discussed. It took several days after my therapy session for the full image to emerge: the Sarsen Woman (but also my own person) embedded in a large, old, hardwearing, lush-green oak tree. My body—the tree’s robust trunk. My arms and legs—his branches and roots, growing deeply into the Earth. I am pregnant with black, rich humus, packed with seeds, some of which have already sprouted. Some are flowers already blooming. But I am not feeling the pressure of giving birth. Quite the opposite. I am patiently waiting for all of the seeds to germinate.

The song of the oak tree is a low humming I hear with my imaginal ear, leaf-rustling wind gently waving its fingers, revealing glimpses of past and future moments I cannot consciously access (Arneson, 2021, p. 169). Considered one of the primary mythologemes in human history, *Quercus* trees are venerated across the globe, various cultures attaching profound symbolic meanings to the non-human beings. The oaks’ hardiness, adaptability, longevity, robustness, and usefulness to the human species have inspired thousands of iconographic and artistic representations. These trees and humans have migrated along the same paths since the earliest times of *Homo Sapiens* history, spreading out from Africa to other places, most markedly (given my heritage), to Southern and Northern Europe. Used for food, the oak trees offered also “medicine, fuel, shelter and art” (Leroy, Plomion, & Kremer, 2020, p. 1012) to modern humans and a way to organize time-space according to the vertical and horizontal axes the trees silhouette. Crowns reach the skies; roots plunge deep into the earth, wide spread branches draw imaginary lines and split the horizon into four directions. And so, the oak trees became a representation of the cosmic tree, the oldest mythical conceptualization of the universe, imposing order and anchoring human beings within the sacred web-of-Creation and the Great Mystery.

Oaks are benefactors. Siphoned from the mysterious depths of the planet Jupiter, which Arneson describes as the “Earth’s protector,” “shield,” and “doorkeeper,” their astral powers are magical. Jupiter is a planet that brings change of luck (2021, p. 173). Or, perhaps in my case, a change of health, returning to equilibrium the imbalances I have lived, a thread connecting the various allies on this healing soul-song track. The oak tree symbol is charged with rebalancing energy, and so is restorative.

One of the most common species of oak trees across Europe and Bulgaria, my homeland, is *Quercus robur*. The Latin word *robur* literally means “hard timber” and metaphorically connotes “strength.” Its derivative “robust” bears the same connotation, arriving in English via French (Gibson, 2018, p. 22). Hence, the oak tree in my vision echoes the coiled snake’s messages: inner strength, fortitude, courage, resilience, which I need since I am walking the end-of-life path. Patience. Restoring balance. Re-orienting. My life takes a new direction by strengthening the connection to the sacred feminine and the Transpersonal.

An oak tree is also a doorway to both “the riches and the despairs of the ancestors” (Arneson, 2021, p. 177). The Canadian clinical herbalist’s interpretation of the oak tree symbolism resonates strongly with me because it identifies two attitudes I have adopted in these healing soul-song tracks when connecting to my ancestors: those, who inhabit the underworld of trauma, the silenced ones, bearing their pain alone in the darkness, and also those who carry the light of knowledge from the sky world (p. 177). Tracing unacknowledged inter- and trans-generational psychic wounds, I have explored my parents’ and grandparents’ bloodlines, mythopoetically reconstructing the past, the wordless language of blood speaking their memories (Arneson, 2021, p. 180). The oak energies are helping me bring together what I have learned, for oak’s medicine is “blood medicine,” healing wounds, speeding the formation of scabs. “A healing with oak leaves very little scar tissue behind” (Arneson, 2021, p. 180). The teachings of oak are about bearing witness to pain and suffering, not hacking it out and removing it, but waiting for the shift that inevitably occurs when emotional seasons change. The oak loses his leaves in the fall, only to sprout new ones in the spring. The oak tree reminds me to listen in silence and stillness to my difficult emotions, my terminal illnesses, my painful symptoms and bodyspeak if I am to find the treasures of the numinous in my existence (Arneson, 2021, p. 180). “Oak,” writes Arneson, “ignites wonder where there was once only hardship and pain” (p. 182).

In Bulgarian folklore, the *Quercus* family represents cosmic balance and harmony, the Great Round, and infinite space-time. The oak symbolizes attributes such as vitality, hardiness, grit, strength, longevity, wisdom, courage, and greatness (Nikolova, 2014, p. 60). The trees’ connection to fire is clearly established through the association of oak with the ancient Slavic god of thunder and fire, Перун (p. 54).

Oaks and fire share an intriguing bond, for lightning hollows the oak’s trunk and makes shelter for other animals who make home of it in the holes at the heart of the tree (Arneson, 2021, p. 182). And so, the oak tree brings me hope, not for cure or longevity—it is unrealistic to believe my

terminal illnesses will be miraculously eradicated—but hope of walking the path with resolve, dignity, courage, and grace. “Beginnings are endings. Death is birth. ... journeys to the Underworld bring treasures. [Oak opens] the door to magic” (pp. 183-184). Yet, I have faith in my healing because there is difference between eliminating an illness and restoring balance by repairing the bodymind and soul.

All of the allies in this healing soul-song track remind me that there is time to complete the transformation, to feel my powers and use them for good. My healing journey is not about curing myself, or getting rid of the pain and distress, but of traversing the trauma terrain with a brave and compassionate heart. They assure me I have the inner resources and wisdom to continue on the end-of-life path, fully aware that any end is just another beginning. It is not new knowledge, but having the allies with me is comforting and encouraging.

All of the allies discussed here are counterbalancing therapeutic metaphors to the Death mother archetype, expressing my resolve to live and to heal. Energetically, they introduce changes to the inner landscape such that the hopelessness, powerlessness, and helplessness previously holding me in their grip are much easier to manage and control. Energetically, all of the allies support my altered attitude, the shift of consciousness, conscience, and philosophical outlook that is deep and enduring, with the consequent restructuring of my psychological structures as well. I am open to the formation of new “basic premises of thoughts, feelings, and actions” that “dramatically and [possibly permanently alter my] way of being in the world” (Morrell & O’Connor as cited in Walton, 2014, p. 26). Acclaiming the allies and embracing the transition to a whole Vessela, I replenish my life forces and return to wellbeing.

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Expressive Landmark 26: May 31, 2024

A quiet morning. No chirping birds, no chattering magpies. I am nervous, stock-still at the kitchen window, my breathing—shallow. It is the day of my fourth CT scan, a decisive threshold to cross on my cancer treatment journey. I try not to think about the future. Weary of the news I will receive in three weeks, I hear my inner voice, soft and soothing. It tells me I am healing notwithstanding the results. Connecting with a surge of hopeful energy, the crisp morning air I inhale fully and look at the back yard trees; their fresh greenness enters my body and settles in my belly, where the butterflies are still fluttery-fretful but faint. It takes some effort to stop the worried thoughts and ‘what ifs.’ Finally, a wave of relief washes over me. Healing is happening because I have opened to love and joy, inviting the magic of each day to fill my heart, to expand my consciousness, so I can perceive the extraordinary miracles beneath the mundane, beyond the visible.

I suspect this state won’t hold long enough to reset my nervous system, but the feeling while it lasts is remarkable. The humdrum isn’t intrusive; it is part of the miracle, for even the most annoying chores don’t vex me nowadays. Wholly embracing the change, I have no idea where it leads. To live with the unpredictable, to surrender to the flow of Life, to trust the unfolding events bring me what I need, so I continue to deepen my connections to the web-of-Creation and its wisdom: it is a new way of being I am learning. And there are the guides whose mystical powers enter my existence by way of images. Real or fanciful, they bring wellness because the body rebalances energetically as I accept a future when the person I have been and am will cease to exist.

My husband and I get in the car. It is still early. Trying to beat the traffic, we travel the by now familiar route from our house to the Cross Cancer Institute. Silence snugs me, the stillness wrapping my body like a soft, silk dress. I let the morning light tease my eyes gently while I offer my attention to slight movements in my surroundings. I take in the beauty of the powdery-blue horizon and the swaying, verdant grasses on the side of the road. The clouds are white and puffy, spread like crumpled paper balls across the celestial floor. They roll fast. It is a windy day, brisk yet inviting.

Suddenly, a raven swoops sinuously and lands on the patch of grass, his black shape sharply contrasting with the lush greensward. I focus on his tail, ruffled and large. A biiiig biiird. I cannot see his eyes. Worrying the morning serenity, the feathered being is solid, plump, and slightly frightening. I don’t know if he brings grim or uplifting news, or both, for many folk wisdom traditions consider ravens to be tricksters. Promptly, the enigma of the bird’s presence conjures up the vision I had

during my second shamanic journey when a Raven-guide took me to a place of luminous light and peace.

The Raven is a complex symbol. Growing up, in my culture of origin, the bird was thought to be a messenger of unfortunate news, often an omen foretelling death and demise. One of Hristo Botev's most popular poems powerfully depicts the raven as a harbinger of death, the bird's croak—alarmingly haunting; the alliteration of guttural 'r' and liquid 'p' in “гарванът грачи грозно, зловещо” (“Обесването на Васил Левски”)—sinister and terrifying. Yet, the birds' mysterious energy in many cultures relays shape-shifting and between worlds mediation, for the charcoal feathered beings are astonishing flyers, adept aerialists, gliding or wing-flapping their wedge-shaped annexes. They carry knowledge from the skies and from the underworld (Wilkins, 1994, p. 78).

June 17-June 28, 2024

What message does the raven bring me this morning? No matter how intensely I wonder, no answer is forthcoming. I have not truly connected with the transpersonal presence, in my heart, still a representation of death. My anticipation of the end is growing stronger, and fears swell up because of the decisions I have to make. The new developments situate me ambiguously at both ends of the existential dance, constantly oscillating. But I try to be patient. I look at the sky and the blooming, vibrant annuals in the front yard flower bed: golden yellow marigolds, pink, purple, and lilac-hued petunias, the lillies from last year already budding, the geraniums and their gentle petals brightly punctuating the space next to the snapdragons the colour of old wine. And... I relax. Life is beautiful!

Tingles travel all over my body, overwhelmed and brimming with awe. At once, my heart squeezes tightly, trying to shore the uncontrollable gush of sorrow, the wave of loss abruptly rippling through me. The fear of Death: an inept response conditioned since birth and through the reading of modern literature, from Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* to Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Camus' *The Stranger*. Then, I remember: the Raven symbolizes transformation, and so, I can rely on him to assist me with the current contemplation. A sign of metaphysical hope, my guide compels me to revisit what I know about death and dying from the perspective of my lifespan's larger rhythms, fearless and fierce in the face of the trials ahead of me, cumbrous yet sure to occur because of the latest news.

The chemotherapy is working on the lung tumor, lymph nodes, and perhaps on the pancreas but not on the liver metastases. The last oncologist's appointment brings me closer to truth: I will have to choose wisely my next steps. The impossibility of using local radiation because of the size and location of the liver masses opens widely the door to the unknown. It is a timely happening, forcing me once again to reconsider what my values are, what I want my life to be before the slow (or maybe not even so gradual?) passing from to fall to winter. And so, the big questions loom: What is my purpose now? What significance does my life have? Do I continue to pursue treatment, or do I let the disease take its natural course? How do I turn the terror of Death into beauty? How do I ease myself from life gently, graciously, and humbly? I offer them my attention and thoughtfulness, seeking discernment and clarity. The Raven has delivered his message. Now, my responsibility is to understand it and know how to take the right course of action.

I live an illusion helping me to imagine a future of lasting connection to all the people I love. It is a struggle to envision what is beyond the physical reality, beyond the flesh; yet, imagining a return to a field of energy, awaiting resurrection, is consoling. The concept of life after death, not in a religious sense, but as relatedness to the cosmic patterns of regeneration and renewal, partaking in the constant change and flux preserving the flow of energy and creativity across the Universe, is reassuring. I have to believe in something, so hope can flout despair. The sacredness of the Great Mystery I hold onto makes me fully aware of the reality Death is: a finitude beyond which there is emptiness. Those close to me will live in the void for a while because of their loss, the physical contact with me nulled, if they don't believe in post-death communication. Their bereavement will be a form of love I won't be able to receive because the body that could feel it will be a pile of ashes. What will remain are the memories they have of me. Nonetheless, the one-sidedness of such a relationship makes grief both a burden and a reprieve. I imagine their sorrow's reverence, hopeful they will embrace their pain tenderly and softly. I picture them offering each other deep care, so the hollowness is tolerated and digested, and eventually relinquished.

I will dwell in the void, which I imagine is the ultimate resting place of revival and radical makeover. Whether consciousness remains beyond the matter that currently makes me, I don't know, and in all honesty, it is of little concern because the new form coming-into-being probably will have its own consciousness. But the potential of turning into energy flowing through whatever-this-other-is appeals to me. Plants and animals teach me the Great Round repeats: a contemplation of immortality, which clearly alleviates the death fear, granting me inner peace and resilience. I want to prepare for what is to come, so I can live gracefully and wholly the time left. Joy, dignity, fortitude,

kindness, humility, and forgiveness cluster like stars: bright constellations on the map of inner values. Beauty is what I believe in, and beauty I want to follow to my last breath.

Reflecting on death and dying inevitably brings me to the topic of Life: what the good life will be from this point on. And the focus withers to palliative and comfort care. The art of dying well asks me to make meaning of the amount of suffering I am ready to bear for reasons presently unnamed since I am pain free, still able to do things independently, and to interact with my beloved ones. How well would I be able to live up to the standards and values of my being once the disease progresses? Hence, the need to examine what my worldview entails.

The Summation of Life

Death anxiety because of worries
about living well in
the twilight months, weeks, days, hours
voices itself
loudly today.

Preoccupied with the end of life,
I marvel at the imagination's power
to void-paint no picture
of a white-shrouded corpse
covered head to toes,
waxwork paleness
of losses too many to count,
blanking memories
and stories,
what braves after the last breath.

A mindbody filled
with sensations so vivid,
a new reality
of immortality
births false consciousness
of self-determination
and control.

Is it an escape, really,
to seek medical assistance in death?

Ethical questions thorn-prickly
pierce the flesh: the canvas
of my morality
hosts a complicated palette of
values, some more tenuous

than others.

Death fear's advice fails though it affects
my stance to the point
of being all consuming,
leaving two options: fight or flee.
But neither is a solution.

Perhaps, there is no solution.
It will be not alright soon, or for a long time,
as grief begins its walk
across the body,
stealthily, insistently filling in
every crevice and nook,
anticipatory.

Unspeakable secrets swirl
around a flesh with no vital signs.
Claimed, the life extinct
is another statistic on a long spreadsheet
Death keeps track of
for eternity.

The precariousness of Life is
liberating.

I gamble on the side
of soma that keeps
saying no to invasive procedures
battling despair against hope
pride against humility
impatience against patience
anger against love
strength against vulnerability.

How do I remain a person
in the hands of cure-not-care motivated
medical professionals
who see charts and numbers,
an object to prick and probe,
poke and prod, and so to investigate
for any signs to tell them
another pill, another treatment,
another surgery will do the trick
to stave off the fated
when a small act of kindness
is all I need?

The paradox of being immune to
someone else's suffering
because you've sworn to do no harm.

Then, I see the garden.
All colours bright and soothing.
My body's petunias, pink, purple, lilac-tinged;
the marigolds of thoughts
round-shaped and curly,
the softness of snapdragons'
old-wine mouths with yellow edges.
The orange tiger lilies
star-gazing in the afternoon sun.

Death fear life desire:
two-sided newly minted coin.

I toss it in the air
and catch: a heads or tails
but never neither.

June 30, 2024

Death: A Disruption

Can I call Death a disruption?
I had a life plan
(as nebulous as it was)
before
the point of no return;
a cancer diagnosis still
wasn't the ultimate reason
to stop desiring,
to re-evaluate my purpose.

It is different today.
Can I embrace the permanency of
Death's disruption?

Can the object of my fear
become the subject of love and hope,
a dialectic of gathering and relinquishing?

My inner witness gracefully
grants me support
in pursuit of meaningful activities

not in avoidance but in service
to what-it-is-that needs my will,
energy directed to endure the periods of
suffering, to revere and accede
to joy and great closeness
with Nature and all others—human and
nonhuman.

Composing poetry, it is my plea to
know the truth,
my curiosity propelled not because
I am ready
but because I am learning to welcome
Death as an intimate companion.

What are its teachings?
I believe it is pure love, the choice
to give and to receive it.

Today,
the raven's deep croak tells me
I can transform terror into beauty
I can receive the care of others
and offer my compassion to those
whose loss and sorrow
will space-time bulge.

Words of gratitude and reconciliation
don't do justice to the liberty of living
fiercely, extending my affection
beyond the physical event of
letting the broken body go.

A gift: Death demands essential nakedness,
becoming fully transparent to those
journeying with me on the end-of-life
road.

Asking for forgiveness even when
toxicity poisons my view.
Offering forgiveness even if I am
incredulous about the moral worth
of the behaviour.
Offering forgiveness to myself,
in humble recognition of my limitations
as a human being aspiring perfection
only to find vulnerability
and incompleteness,

scarred soul-skin and psychic
purple-yellowing
hematomas in its place.

Once the process of saying
goodbyes is done,
Death will not be a disruption
but enlargement of my being's
integrity and the sanctity of
Life.

The moment when my
suffering
would have attained its
meaning.

July 2, 2024

Death Familiar and Simple

My mom, a few years ago,
told me the story of
a relative
taking a gun and shooting
himself because
he could not bear the shame
and anguish of
Parkinson's disease.

He died in my mom's arms, his
wife watching from afar
perched on the terrace.
Screaming.

My mom worked as a registered nurse.
Death to her is simple
and familiar,
her own losses teaching her
reverence for its swift snatching
but also because she witnessed
the final hours of many
who surrendered
control over their bodies
in the ER, subject to medicalized,
drawn-out, agonizing dying,
a terrifying prospect for anyone.

She also knows the bite of Death,
cannot be snubbed.

I am aware nowadays, Death is
not the rapid and decisive
decline of an ill-body
past generations had witnessed,
but a prolonged, chanced,
and regulated exertion of technological
advancements onto flesh irreparably wrecked
no longer capable of bearing them.

More often than not,
it is not a desired death,
the passage from living
to not living
unsuccessfully accomplished.

To what end?
Undermining the significance
of Death does not make me
immune to the dread
of not having a choice.
In fact, I am more afraid of
having to make this choice
because I doubt I will receive
help with the answer.

How and what am I
to choose?

Relieving suffering or
extending life?

At what cost?
A risk analysis is tricky
when moral imperatives are
taken too seriously
in denial of Death
as a natural event.

Am I obliged to pursue
a course of action that
honours the unfolding of Life
to its organic end?

Or would my conscience

dictate an outcome determined
with a controversial moral
calculus seeking to establish
the greatest utility for all?

It is a Procrustean bed.

Extending life does not mean
living with less pain and
more joy.

Shortening life is a moral quandary
causing as much harm as
the other option.

And there I lie.

Impaled on the horns of a dilemma
I am unable to bypass.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, September 25). *Impaled* [Digital art].

July 8, 2024

Flourishing in a failing body: after my conversation with the oncologist, my purpose changes again. The summation of my life so far and for the near future narrows down to one priority—thriving even in the twilight leg of my life-journey. To accomplish it I need courage, humility, and mental strength. I need the assistance of my family and friends, but also the aid of the transpersonal presences by way of which Psyche orients me to wellness and wholeness.

The black Bear arrives surprisingly on the day of the Summer Solstice during my most recent shamanic journey. She stands tall and roaring, not angry but mighty. Her energy swoops into my belly where thunderbolt intuitive pangs, fearful-nervous constrictions, and tight worry-anxious knots usually reside. I embrace the transpersonal creature eagerly. Instantly, I see the wild being in my mind's eye, crawling into her den, getting ready for hibernation. Fall follows summer, winter comes after fall; and suddenly before me flashes what the nightfall stage of my cancer trip could be prior to entering an indefinitely lengthy period of dormancy. I trust the power animal is here to help me understand the existential cycle and assuage my dread of the end. A pattern larger than my experience guides the processes and the unfolding of events, and though I might be bewildered, confused, frustrated, and mournful, the Bear is here to teach me patience and fortitude.

A scientific explanation of black bears' hibernation connects Life and Death. The broad-headed, heavy framed, shaggy-coated wild animals choose to conserve their energy before birthing

their offspring, particularly when food is scarce. Slowing down their metabolism, female black bears spend the winter months resting, patiently awaiting spring to deliver their babies. Symbolically, I imagine my death as hibernation, a period of energy conservation, allowing matter to gestate into a new form the web-of-Creation will release when the time is right and ripe.

Wanting to understand what makes me the creature I am, my inner Bear is an evolutionary example of shrewd instinctive discernment to protect Life by way of Death. I enlist her critically important assistance in fathoming the need to slow down and rest, staying proactively inert and bearing. Her medicines are strength, perspicacity, and sweetness.

American black bears excellently illustrate Nature's intuitive biological wisdom. Implantation and gestation are processes not immediately related since the female bear mates in the summer but does not give birth till the following spring. If the animal has not stored enough good fat, Nature offers an abortion since implantation never occurs, and the mother-to-be must wait for another year (Hrdy & Sieff, 2015, p. 190). Perhaps, the creative flow's enigmatic rules for the conversion of energy into matter rely on the same generative principle? A new life form might be born when the nourishment for such a being is abundant, ensuring its existence.

The fear of death and dying ensues from my aspirations and desire to survive. A coping mechanism, it warrants a compensatory emotional and psychological safety through the fantasy of immortality. Nonetheless, the survival strategy is relatively ineffective because it bolsters other, outdated "I"-motivated protective and defensive structures. For example, the attachment to a continuous identity locates me in a concrete living physical body and a particular cultural-historical space-time. The possibility of a third cancer and the chemotherapy's partial success to control the metastases in other organs make the disruption of the fleshly being in my present form ever so real. But engaging my creative channels in expressing what comes through "from the other side" and giving it form (Bourzat & Hunter, 2019, p. 103) permits me effectively to surmount those aspects of my finitude. The unconscious, again, offers the imagery I need to let the power of archetypal ancestral symbols move bodily at the same time aiding my attachment to the indigenous land where my roots have been growing for the past thirty years. "A gestation matrix," the unconscious affords change because what ought to be born is given time to develop before it enters the conscious mind (Bourzat & Hunter, 2019, p. 106).

Iain McGilchrist is a contemporary philosopher who believes that space gives rise to form and form is the primary embodiment of space (2022, p. 998). "Life is a sort of being, which can only be properly got to grips with by emphasizing its coming-to-be." A spatial arrangement is a

prerequisite for the consolidation of matter into a form (2022, p. 997), and a form is “the coming together of an essentially static, receptive potential (space) with an essentially motivating, ‘informing’ energy (force)” (p. 999). The void I refer to in an earlier paragraph is not a condition of sterility and inertia but “of limitless, undifferentiated potential” (p. 999). McGilchrist understands space to be a property of fields of *energy*, of potential creation, and so the two concepts are intimately woven (p. 999; author’s emphasis). My existence, therefore, is spiral-like because I trust the difference from my extant form will be generated within a kind of sameness but on a novel plane. Feasibly, the reason for believing in reincarnation is not simply a fake consolation but a conceivable reality, which I can only experience once Death claims me.

So, imagining Death as hibernation offers me hope, and my heart stops hammering, my breath deepens, and my entire body sinks further into the recliner, restful. “It is as much from our hope of what might be as it is from the loss of what was that our value and our meaning are born” (Bishop, 2016, p. 30). My finitude exceeds my knowing, and so, an expectant humility gives birth to the belief that something infinite and mysterious awaits me. Its silence and stillness give shape to the whole that will come-to-be a new form in a different space-time, in a different pattern of existence.

The *Tao Te Ching*, too, captures well the potency of creative emptiness and quiescence, of the generative absence Death is.

We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2024, June 22). *My Power Animal* [Photo-art].

but it is the inner space
that makes it livable.

We work with being,
but non-being is what we use.

(Lao Tzu, ch. 11, 1988/2006)

At this point, I am ready to paint my power animal and absorb her medicines.

Insufficient information from my doctors (not entirely their fault) cannot paint a clear picture of what to expect because necessary fallibility (Gorovitz & MacIntyre as cited in Pimlott, 2015, p. 203) is part and parcel of the limits to current medical knowledge. Asking my oncologist to



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2024, June 23). *Flourishing Spirit* [Digital art].

predict the outcome stretches the boundaries of his competence, imprecisions and inaccuracies, plain omissions at times, revving up my uncertainty. For example, he knew the checkpoint inhibitor first administered for the lung cancer worked effectively for 50% of the patients, but whether I was part of the 'lucky' half, he could not foretell. My body, my personal history, and the record of my traumas stored in my cells, even my personality and attitude are pivotal players. So I am sure my fleshly vessel knows the dying processes intimately and will follow suit when the time comes.

But how does an ailing body thrive? A new chasm opens because of the question's depth. The answers come from my power animal, the black Bear energy recovered a few weeks ago. Focusing on the preciousness of the finite, I am ready to look into the infinite.

Life's sweetness is often compared to the viscous amber-coloured liquid bees make from the nectar of flowers. But bears are not really after the honey when they raid beehives. It is the pure protein the bodies of immature bees provide that they desire. Withstanding the metaphorical bee stings, my inner black Bear stretches a paw toward the brood comb, scooping the prized delicacy. My being reaches out for the sweetness of Life only to discover it is already there, in my heart's beehive. Death's sting and beauty's syrupy thickness co-mingling in a paradoxical soul-food, supporting the irreparably fading soma with a new *gravitas*, a quality that hopefully will help me carry the weight of my fears with dignity and openness, humbly (Weller, 2015, p. 64). I imagine the ashes I will be after cremation, and the words of Weller ring balmy and soothing, like a singing bowl: "the soul in grief feels reduced, brought to the place where all other thoughts or matters dissipate into ashes" (p. 65). The time spent in this form is holy.

The solidity of my living being comes from the embodiment of motion rooted in a space. Turtle Island-Canada is the land I walk when the sun rises in the morning, where I go to sleep once it sets in the evening. Turtle Island-Canada is the land to walk on during the final stretch of my lifetime voyage. It is a place of resonances and vibrations, which connect me to the Earth's depths and where my diffusion over the inner and outer landscapes is awe-inspiring and fitting. The transpersonal presences, showing up with a force I have never experienced before, indeed mark the milestones of my personal quest, the significant points of restructuring and reimagining of my personal mythology. And so, I turn my attention to Turtle, the animal representing the spirit of the land and the depths.

I began my healing journey with the guiding metaphor of a tourist. A reflection on the Turtle archetype helps me to see that, in fact, I am a traveler. A traveler wants to experience life in a given location; a tourist wants to have fun and relax. Once the trip is over, a tourist returns home while a traveler usually continues beyond the latest sojourn in pursuit of new destinations. To travel means one is constantly in a transitional, in-between, liminal state.

The memoir's healing soul tracks are figurative paths I have followed. They certainly lead to self-discoveries and reshaping of identities all the while allowing Turtle's energies gradually to coalesce and rise. Exploring the progression of my diseases, I have also dwelled in unfamiliar settings and experienced wild—both literal and metaphorical—encounters, which have enlarged my perspective and surely have changed me.

Traveler and tourist are words with dissimilar etymologies: "traveler" derives from the verb "to travel," a variant form of "travail," "to struggle, to toil, to labour" (Travel). Thus, 'sufferer' is an

obsolete meaning concealed under the word's current semantic skin. To travel means to undertake an arduous journey, certainly one that results in taking risks and making sacrifices, instructing a willingness to learn a new way of life. My cancers indisputably are asking of me to take risks I am frequently unprepared for, demanding sacrifices I am reluctant to make, and challenging me to learn a new way of being. Unlike a tourist, it is not in circles that I am moving, enacting the original (now archaic) meaning of the root verb "to tour" (Tour). I am not back 'home.' I am on my way to a new Home, in a completely unknown and alien location.

Do I think I can thank my cancers? The answer is unequivocal "Yes" though there are also those days when the answer is indisputably "No." Caught up in the existential dance, the felt sense of connection to the home I have built with my husband in Edmonton grounds me, Bulgaria becoming a second home I have carried on my back from the first moment I set foot on Turtle Island-Canada territory. Just like a turtle.

Turtles are adaptable species. They live in water and on land. They also inhabit the sky, if the stories of olden times are true. Astronomers have named Turtle the planetary nebula NGC 6210, located in the northern constellation of Hercules (Henney, López, García-Díaz, & Richer, 2021, p. 1070). And so, Turtle speaks to my adaptability but also to my capacity to transcend the tensions that have dictated the direction of my journey: the self-place map way-marking (Hunt, 2006, p. 320) the routes thus traveled and the distances to the nearest sites where insights ascended from the depths.

I have arrived at the last junction of my healing journey: the transitional space I have begun to traverse is untried, yet the energy of Turtle advises me to slow down, to offer attention, and to embrace the experiences awaiting me. The fable of the hare and the tortoise comes to mind. I grew up with it, the lessons obscure at the time but vivid and meaningful now. To travel with Turtle is to discover the unfathomable, mysterious wisdom of Nature and Life, seeping into conscious awareness.

Turtle's movement paced, deliberate;
hare's pride and arrogance
setting him up for no win.

I am the hare. I race time. I race
ambiguity. Haughtily asking
my body: when will you arrive
at the final destination?
A computed distance my doctors

cannot cut off,
unlike the fox, who in Aesop's fable
consents to be the judge, marking the distance
hare and turtle are bound to cover.

I sleep peacefully at the side of the
road, confident in my victory.
But my inner Turtle is sagacious.
She moves steadily.
She crosses the bridge
connecting known and unknown,
outliving species long extinct and those
currently making the Earth their home.

For more than 200 million years
Turtle has moved through eons
of evolutionary changes.
A creature of mysterious
symbolic and artistic transformations.

She follows her instinct: "the race is not
always to the swift."¹

Her ability to protect herself.
Remarkable.

July 30, 2024

The meaning of Turtle, like the Raven and the Bear, supports me in this transition. To navigate the landscape of my bodily cosmology with a renewed sense of appreciation for the marvellous power of transcendence: Turtle takes the shape of a traditional Bulgarian embroidery motif, called the Cosmic Turtle. Inspiring an image of relatedness to the world around me, it aims higher, to the depths of the skies and the Universe, expressing the inexpressible. It is a sign of reorientation from materialistic to transpersonal values.

¹ Aesop, n.d.

In Bulgarian culture, the Cosmic Turtle motif symbolizes longevity (Isaeva, 2015; Янтра/Yantra MF, 2019). But such a meaning does not harmonize with the swift treatment shifts after the recent visits to the emergency room and the latest modification of my medication regimen. Rather, the Cosmic Turtle cross-stitch pattern is a cosmographic concept that reminds me I am a terrestrial being but also someone related to the stars.

In North American indigenous beliefs, despite the great variety of creation myths, the story of Skywoman is widespread. Skywoman is an immigrant who rests on Turtle's back once the Geese gently break her fall from the Skyworld, the only home she has ever known prior to her toppling to the earth-realm. To make a new home for the human being, Muskrat—the weakest of the divers—brings sludge from the ocean floor to the surface, risking his life to serve the newcomer's need for sanctuary and shelter. “Here, put [the mud] on my back and I will hold it,” Turtle says to the rest of the animals. And Turtle holds, not just Skywoman but the newly created Earth, which the celestial ancestor sings and dances into existence as an act of her deep gratitude (Kimmerer, 2013, pp. 3-4; Horn-Miller, 2016, pp. 20-22). A symbol of wisdom, Turtle also knows where she is going, crossing the sky-space with perseverance and confidence.

In depth psychology, Turtle symbolizes the transpersonal Self (Smith-Marder, 2006, p. 234).

It is a source of strength. The solid base that can support any burden, no matter how heavy, and it is the inner guiding spirit that goes with us on our journeys, no matter how far and no matter how deep, and eventually brings us home (Bradway as cited in Smith-Marder, 2006, p. 233).

Turtle is about gathering my energies and focusing them on pursuits that will continue to affirm my full expression: the joys and the struggles, the pain and the peace, the hope and the dejection, the instincts and the spirit, as the progression toward Death charts the way forward. Expecting unusual things to happen, the voice of Turtle speaks to the impossibility of ever reaching the limits of restorying and restoring, becoming indigenous not by birth but by choice to a psychological world spread over the Turtle shell and providing the fertile soil for the seeds of understanding and consciousness to grow. Turtle, Jung mused, is the representation of the transcendent function, which reconciles pairs of opposites and opens a space for new emergence (as




Янтра/YantraMF (August 6, 2019). Космическа костенурка/Cosmic Turtle.

cited in Smith-Marder, 2006, p. 236). Turtle's help comes at a time when I face insurmountable obstacles, instinctive knowledge and forces demanding attention and expression, and so, guiding me through the stages of dying. Reason and will are useless, and so I stand on Turtle's back, looking ahead and praying to Hekate. Not resisting change but welcoming such a new becoming.

Assimilating the intuitive wisdom all of my transpersonal guides and guardians impart on me, I am divining the future with Turtle's assistance. She is a relational transpersonal presence bridging the profoundly personal and the numinous cosmic enormity, the indigenous and non-indigenous, carrying on her back the meaning of my life as reinvented through my healing journey. She instructs me to continue to bring mud from the depths, to keep singing and dancing my song of gratitude and appreciation for the preciousness of my finitude against the vast immensity of the infinite: sky and earth joined, my disparate parts—the shadowy and the sun-lit—forming the past, present, and future wholeness of the person known in this life as Vessela.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2024, June 17). *Cosmic Turtle* [Digital art].



the cosmology of the body²
is written with more than just human presences
the texture of sun rays
carving lines on the skin

the rustling of leaves
as the wind grafts invisible memories

rain washing away grit and dirt
mapping points of arrivals and departures
while snow's whispering softness
tickles cilia,
drawing a line between the horizon

and my bloodstream

the cosmology of the body is written
on the sky
at night

roaming planets and stars
glittering in darkness anticipating
light in lightness
seeking
desiring
striving
hoping
in terrible sadness or sorrow
birthing the body's story of wounding
and wonder

the cosmology of the body is written
in earthy smells, the grasses waving welcomes
and goodbyes, the sweat and salt on lips
to carry the heaviness in the heart
outward

a world full of magic, hidden from sight
under an ancient mountain
in the depth of a lake
wrapped in oceans' waves

the cosmology of the body is written
in forces beyond our knowing
attracting, repelling,
merging or splitting,
transforming
a wound into breath and life into fate.

² The poem's title is borrowed from Greenwood, 2016, p. 16.

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18 | ON CROSSING THE ULTIMATE THRESHOLD

Final Expressive Landmark

On Crossing the Ultimate Threshold: a Prayer To Hekate



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, February 7).
Moon-singing [Colour pencils and oil pastels].

“[A] cosmology of our relationships with ourselves”
(Greenwood, 2016, p. 16)

“Amplifying subtle signs of vitality
through images, symbols, and archetypes
while exploring what is behind them”
(Stanley, 2016, p. 125)

An invitation for the “protective
spiritual resources to arise to awareness”
(Stanley, 2016, p. 131)

Drawing the moon-mandala, my body picks up
the chanting, a quiet, slow, low uhmhhh. Vibrations
spread through limbs, torso, and head. I feel the
energy rivering through arteries, reaching cells,

settling in tiny organelles, humming an ageless song.

The song of the ancient night.

The howl of the black dog.

The summon of crossroads where blood, magic, and primordial memory meet.

Native of Thrace, the deepest of my ethnic roots.

I pray to you, Moon Goddess, bearer of truths about the “vast past of [my] origins and the depths of [my] inner being” (George, 1992, p. 150/329).

Invoking Hekate, the night/moon goddess of liminality (Balinska-Ourdeva, 2021),
“originally a multifaceted Goddess, associated with childbirth, the crossroads, and healing” (Vogel, 2012, p. 70), I face the future, time unhurriedly slipping through my fingers, like grains of sand, or the ephemeral dandelion seeds the wind picks up and sends adrift. The divinity is a unifying image

of *yin* energies, split into Persephone (maiden), Demeter (mother), and Hekate (crone) in the ancient Greek myth that unconsciously has ruled my life until this point.

flower-gathering	mother /daughter,
brutally taken	wife / husband,
to the underworld	trusted confidant, truth-seeker, a witness
to discover	
intimacy with death	& gateway to the mysteries of revival
re/sourcing renewal	through the sacrifice of innocence
	& receiving
	dark feminine 3bodied multiscopic wisdom
separated from mother	
serving a husband	what cannot sustain the burdens of Life
	in the upper world
daughter, not wife	recurring in the depths of the underworld
wife, not daughter	death mothering beauty ¹
	the alchemy of
returning to youth in the upper world	
resuming adulthood in the underworld	opening up
	to womanhood fullness
Hekate mediating, balancing	
between	

a full moon
singing²

The undivided Hekate mytheme contains the energies of all three womanhood stages (Vogel, 2012, p. 70). In my life, Hekate's powers are ancestral, inherited through the healing abilities of прабаба Пена, who was a traditional Bulgarian баячка, the equivalent of an indigenous North American medicine woman.

My great-grandmother's story is mystery-cloaked. She came from a land I simultaneously know and don't know, for the past obscures the connections to the present further back in time a person travels.

The Land I Come From³

bulgarian woman chants
bulgarian woman sings
black aproned tiny woman
chants and sings those who

fear and want a release: “Заигра се небо, заиграа се звезди...”⁴

so black aproned tiny woman
plants herself in front of the fire
her movements slow and deliberate
her image seared onto my pupils
the black-and-white colour of netted memories
lost and found
in an old tattered album
my mom keeps on the book shelves
not the other story
black aproned woman tells
in the dim light of the quaint kitchen
behind closed doors

behind closed doors
bulgarian woman knows what is what
when all goes wrong
how to spin the bottle of medicine
how to throw the bread flour into the hearth,
letting it paint a picture of the broken soul's dread
how to step forward
or backwards what to repeat
what to omit

bulgarian woman chants
bulgarian woman sings
ancient incantations
ring ring ring: fall down
in the silence
of fading memories

black aproned woman chants
black aproned woman sings
bulgarian woman chant and sing
dig down
scrape away the layers
of sleeping memories
edify the root of my story
so the torrent of time will not wash it away

One learns to live with the unknown. Memory holes, a personal herstory spun from black-and-white wool yarn, many times knitted-reknitted over. Sometimes it murmurs invitingly, like a gentle zephyr caressing tree leaves, tenderly pressing on the edge of remembrance, sometimes ravaging the present with its squall force.

Прабаба Пена had the bluest eyes I had ever seen.

Прабаба Пена is a presence in absence, living under the drift of lost evocations. Lately, she has been on my mind because herstory offers the missing pieces of a puzzle I am struggling to knit together.

~

A young and precocious girl, Пена sits down on the three-legged stool at софрата, her eyes carefully attending to her grandmother's movements, the way the slender, aged woman tenderly carries a bouquet of medicinal herbs in her weathered hands. Пена's баба has picked the plants from the nearby fields, roaming the wild grasses since the first sparkles of dawn. The girl's gaze fixates on her grandma's fingers as they lovingly start braiding a garland, preparing билките to dry on the thin rope, hanging above the wooden shelf, next to the hearth. The smell of summer sweetness swirls around the room and sneaks into Пена's nose. She knows the time to listen to баба's stories is near because the old woman, wearing a black apron and a black kerchief, covering her long, straw-coloured braids, will soon begin to shell the black beans to be cooked for dinner, forming a neat pile on софрата.

"Баба tells the most fascinating stories," Пена thinks. "Баба knows the secrets of magical worlds below the one where my family lives, three lands down into the Earth's womb, where халата has made her den."

Once upon a time ...

The night was pitch dark. The youngest of three brothers, nestled in the branches of the golden apple tree, listened to the leaves rustling, their whispers coaxing him to be patient. The leaves' voices would change with халата's approach, for in her stormy ascent, the tree would roar and tremble, giving in to her violent breath. The youngest brother took another walnut from the flax sack his mother had packed, and cracked it open. The dark turned even darker. A gust of hot air tingled his face, and he knew: the beast was close. He was ready.

In his palm, the dagger spoke reassuringly. Sharp steel, soundless noises tickling his ears, the melody of blood and courage flattering his strong and alert body. He would be a hero. He would protect the golden apple and kill the mythical creature. He could not envision another ending but being triumphant over халата.

The youngest brother did not specifically know why the beast was so detested and feared, but his two older brothers had told him халата guarded the knowledge of immortality, the art of healing any wound, and the power to see into the future. Халата, therefore, they said, was dangerous. She had to be killed.

At that moment, the wind picked up in force; the darkness became so thick, the youngest brother's eyes looked into the deadly void, not a glimmer of light teasing his pupils. He was blind. His muscles tensed, his body turned into a tightly strung wire, and he pricked his ears, just like the house cat, in anticipation of the beast's arrival. It was exactly midnight.

Пена is not interested in this part of the fairy tale. She knows the story by heart: the youngest brother gravely injures халата, and the dreadful creature retreats to her den. The hero travels the long road to the lower world following her blood drops, only to enter her kingdom and kill the mythical being.

Пена knows her баба will not reveal why халата steals the golden apple each year, but a stirring in the young girl's heart signals the secret is worthy of setting a foot in. She will ask her баба where the entrance to the lower realm is, for her grandma is also a keeper of the ancient teachings of Hekate, the night goddess of crossroads and the ruler of sky, earth, and the underworld. Пена already awaits: when she grows up, she will follow the fairy tale's black-and-white wool yarn, stepping onto the path the whimsical words chart, like white stones on black soil, leading to the precious Truth about Death and Life, the potency of medicinal plants, and the art of soothsaying. Пена knows this knowledge, too, is not to be told openly, for the dangers are lethal, if the powers are not used properly. This much her баба has told her.

Years later, when she is seventeen, and her баба has already joined the ancestors in the spirit land, Пена embarks on the journey to the foot of the mountain where her grandma told her the entrance to the lower world was. Her баба's voice unweaves the guiding wool thread, the words' white loops lined up, coiling around the young woman's feet and moving her forward. Some time passes before Пена reaches the well-deep black hole, her heart's excited singing tell telling of herstory's beginning, and so she crosses the threshold to the underworld confidently. The story opens its arms and welcomes the beautiful maiden into the magical hideaways of its nooks and crannies.

Once inside, Пена discovers the cavern is sunlit even though the Sun has already left to make his round over the upper world. She does not waste time to look at the splendor besieging her, but steps onto the path meandering down and walks purposefully until she reaches the first of three doors her баба had told her about, a fierce black dog guarding it rancorously. But, my great-

grandmother is prepared. From her grandma she knows about the sacrifices she has to make to appease the three black hounds, the sentinels of халата's realm. The previous midnight, she presented a black female lamb to Hekate at a point where three roads met. Now, she carries the offerings in a pouch sewn to the waistband of her long black skirt. At each door, Пена takes out a few pieces of the holy meat and feeds them to the vicious guardian dog. Once past the third door, a tall, heavily ornated golden gate suddenly towers before her. Beyond it, a garden of otheworldly beauty spreads, a golden fence encircling it, and two fair maidens inside play with two golden apples in the shade of the stunning gemstones covered trees.

“Good day to you, young and beautiful maidens,” Пена greets.

“Good day to you, young and beautiful maiden,” they reply. “What brings you to our kingdom, fair maiden? Have you lost your way?” Their voices are sweet and viscous; like molasses, the words drip, heavy with the scent of caramel and midsummer honey.

“I have come to find халата. My баба told me only she can teach me the Truth about Death and Life, the potency of medicinal plants, and the art of soothsaying. I have brought her gifts.”

“Халата is infuriated. Last night she came from the upper world wounded, and now rests in her chambers. She may eat you if you insist on seeing her at this moment.”

“I know about your mother's injury. My баба told me the story. A young hero stabbed халата with his dagger last night when she tried to steal the golden apple from the precious tree in his mother's backyard. He is heading to the well-deep black hole now in the company of his two older brothers, following халата's blood trail, steadfast on killing her. I know how to save your mother. Here, I have brought her offerings. The consecrated meat of a black female lamb, yew branches and garlic braided into a garland. Please, take them to халата.”

The two sisters, for they indeed are халата's daughters, immediately recognize the young woman as the one their mother has spoken about. They know the fair maiden will come on the day their mother returns from the upper world hurt and without the prized golden fruit. They take the holy meat, the yew and garlic garland, and invite прабаба Пена to pass into their abode. She steps over the tall golden gate's threshold decisively.

The next three days, Пена helps the two sisters with their chores, also tending to the weakened хала, and in the process, she learns the Truth about Death and Life, the potency of medicinal plants, and the art of soothsaying. On the first day, прабаба Пена learns the secret of the apple's seeds, how to help Life begin, how to honour Death's mystery. On the second day, she learns to expell fears using bread flour, returning courage and hope to an anguished human heart;

she also learns what medicines to use for what wounds, how to counter illness with healing magic. On the third day, my great-grandmother learns to read the signs of the sky, the earth, and the underworld: the coded messages of the four directions and the four elements, what the stars foretell, and the wisdom of all animals roaming our planet and those dwelling among the galaxies, commanding the cosmic energies fuelling the constellations along their paths across the universe.

In this version of the fairy tale, on the third day, the youngest of the three brothers arrives at the tall and heavily ornated golden gate of халата's abode. He sees three beautiful maidens entertaining themselves in a resplendent otherworldly garden: two play with the golden apples from the precious tree in his mother's backyard orchard, with the most beautiful of them playing with an ordinary red apple. He asks the three maidens where халата is, and the most beautiful of them,

прабаба Пена, answers.

“You have come in vain, юначе. Халата rests. She is seething, but I know how to quell her rage. Her knowledge you need, and I already have it, so why don't you shake the rope around your waist three times, and signal to your two older brothers you want them to bring you back to the upper land?”

“Greetings to you, young and beautiful maiden. You are aware I cannot return empty-handed. If I don't kill the beast, my family will suffer. My mother will fall sick, and my brothers will mock me for being a coward.”

“You are brave, юначе, but you are not too smart. Why don't you ask these two fair maidens to come with you? They will bring the golden fruits in their hands with them, for each one is the knowledge keeper of the sacred apples' magical powers. Your brothers will want to marry them. You and I will marry, too, and our families will live happily ever after. Халата is these maidens' mother, and she will protect us. Not just our family but the entire upper world, and beyond гори тилилейски.”



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2023, December 29). *В гори тилилейски* [Digital art].

The youngest brother, taken by surprise, for this were not how the story in his mind ended, stands for a long time in deep thought, pondering my great-grandmother's suggestion. He likes the fairy tale's resolution where хаята becomes his family's protectress because he has no grudge with the mythical being, the fear of her knowledge expunged from his heart since his future wife, and the wives of his brothers, will also possess it. He asks the first maiden if she wants to see the upper world, and with her consent, he ties her to the rope, shakes it three times, and his brothers lift the young woman up. He asks the second maiden if she wants to see the upper world, and with her consent, he ties her to the rope, shakes it three times, and his brothers lift the young woman up. Finally, he ties my great-grandmother, shakes the rope three times and his brothers lift her up, and so Пена returns to her world. The rest of the fairy tale follows the young hero, and is not my прабаба's story except for the happy ending when she marries the youngest brother, my great-grandfather Игнат, and they become the proud parents of their first daughter, my grandma Василка.

~

Thus begins прабаба Пена's journey as a secretive traditional healer whose wisdom and skills the Bulgarian government did not officially sanction or appreciate. Her first magic deed, I imagine, was aiding a young couple to become pregnant. And, the golden apple played its crucial role, for the fruit's seeds held the secret of immortality.

In my mind's eye, I see прабаба Пена in the dimly lit kitchen, walking to the hearth at the room's inner wall. To make the young woman conceive, прабаба Пена splits the golden apple in two, takes the seeds out, and chooses one. She whispers the mystical words хаята has taught her into it. Then, tells her visitor the precious fruit must be consumed after fasting overnight, one half the woman is to eat, the other half—her husband. My great-grandmother also gives the help-seeker the enchanted seed and instructs her to wrap it in a paper towel with the other seeds, using a red woolen belt to bind them together. She is to secure the small package to her waist and carry it for a day. On the following morning, the paper towel must be moistened, and the swathed seeds refrigerated for the next six weeks, their moistness regularly checked. When the time has passed, the young woman is to plant the seeds in a pot. Once the sapplings are strong enough, she must replant them in a fertile soil and tend them with care and love while they develop, for as the sapplings turn into a healthy tree, so will her child grow too.⁵

In my mind's eye, I see прабаба
 Пена chanting, murmuring in hushed
 tones incantations from ancient times,
 the sound resounding through
 generations of healers, reaching my
 heart, my muscles, sinews, and bones,
 finding a safe place to land.

The story from which my
 grandmother and mother come.

The story from which I also
 come.



Balinska-Ourdeva, V. (2015, May 30). *Халата и златната ябълка*
 [Colour pencils].

I look into my great-grandmother's unusually blue eyes, and feel the energies alive, wanting out, to meet the world, to help my body to heal, to help others to find their roots, infusing inner strength and power into their broken souls. To restore balance. To unite the cosmic *yin* and *yang* forces into a sacred marriage each time прабаба Пена moves her hands, seemingly randomly up and down, sideways to the left, then to the right, making large, slow circles. Bending to the kitchen's earthy floor, unrushed, taking one step at a time, reciting the mystical evocations. Three times, around, and around, and around прабаба Пена goes, close to the hearth, turning the bottle with medicinal water, sealing the curative words with a tight lid. I need my great-grandmother's energies with me now, as I gaze into the ultimate precipice, the knowledge of mortality staring at me squarely.

My body vibrates with a quiet, slow, low uhhmmm. Limbs, torso, and head pulsing. I feel the energy rivering through arteries, reaching cells, settling in tiny organelles, humming the ageless song.

The song of the ancient night.

The howl of the black hound.

The summon of crossroads where blood, magic, and primordial memory meet.

Native of Thrace, the deepest of my ethnic roots.

I pray to you, Moon Goddess, bearer of truths about the “vast past of [my] origins and the depths of [my] inner being” (George, 1992, p. 150/329).

~

I did not know it at the time: the sudden crossing into a life to brand my being with blight for which there would be no healing. A blessing and a curse, the threshold I am surprisingly crossing

was probably long in the making. I have lingered on the flat, thin strip of wood beneath the metaphorical door for at least five years, my mutated blood cells keeping the score of a prolonged emotional stress. But two days remain clearly etched in my mind as moments of no return. The days I landed on the other side of ignorance: August 6, 2022 and November 20, 2023. These are the dates of my CML diagnosis, confirmed five days later, and my lung cancer discovery, also verified in a week's time. A destiny I cannot escape; a fate to pave the way to a radically different "me."

It is a strange place to linger, at the threshold. The unknown beckons every minute, for blood test, after blood test, after blood test and numerous CT scans will tell, with questionable accuracy, how my body responds to the treatments. Poison that is a cure. A metaphorical threshold where I am suspended. I am hesitant to imagine a future beyond three months, the timespan of spoonful deliverance: will live, will die.

What I have left behind is certainty, predictability, and comfort. Daily, I am reminded of how lucky I am because I depend on a pill to keep me functioning, a miracle, really, considering what the prognosis is: five years if I don't take it. My body, too, is revved up to the utmost, my immune system constantly on the go because of the checkpoint inhibitor. My lifespan recalculated to eight months without the infusions, possibly five to seven years, if the immunotherapy works, with no other complications from side effects.

Every new development, every new infusion—upgraded to chemotherapy, no longer a checkpoint inhibitor—paves a path I continue to travel: uncertainty whispers constantly, new numbers measure my lifespan's length, now dangerously shortened. There is no time to waste. There are no regrets to dillydally, for each day is a blessing. Befriending the unpredictable, I learn patience. What I have left behind are sadness, deep hurt, and betrayal. Quiet joy, forgiveness, and compassion sneak in and replace them.

What I have left behind is also the fear of leaving, of looking only at one side and measuring a stick from the end that is most visible at first glance. The metaphorical threshold becomes my best teacher, as I linger there, in anticipation of a new adventure, still faltering to step fully into an end I am unprepared yet to accept.

I don't know where I am about to enter. While the door is wide open, I will take my time to stay at the threshold, for crossing it means a finality, a rounding of the thread of my life that has been in the making for more than half a century. I look at the legacy that will be the memory of my becoming. What I have done, what I have felt, what I continue to pursue and long for: these chart a map revealing no endmost port of call. It is the Great Mystery that I am about to follow. And, the

only gift to help me move into that ultimate otherness is the dark feminine wisdom of the Moon Goddess my great-grandmother Пена protected.

To learn from Nature how to be when time is limited, and winter descends only to nurture spring in a seed that would unfurl its beauty when the right moment comes. To learn from wind how to travel distances without stopping to examine whether I have everything needed, for it is the journey that matters and not the final resting place. To learn from water how to replenish myself in a source of fluid and flowing energy, like a current that carries a river back to the ocean, Life's primordial and vast cradle. To learn from soil how to hold, protect, and germinate what nourishes and nurtures vitality and wonder in the most secret and deep moments of sprouting shoots from what is no longer there. I will be a grateful traveler then, and the threshold will no longer be needed to anchor me on the familiar side of the well-deep black hole. I can step grace-fully into the possibilities of xaxara's realm, an unimaginable and numinous beyond.

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¹ Fidyk, 2017, p. 211.

² Balinska-Ourdeva (2023, April 5).

³ Pastiche of Marilyn Dumont's poem “The land she came from” (Dumont, 2015, pp. 43-45)

⁴ Гоев, 1984, p. 29.

⁵ A passage in Розмари Де Мео's novel *Зарана* (2022), pp. 155-164 and scholarly explanations of fertility rituals performed in Gorni Voden, Assenovgrad, Bulgaria (Маджарова, 2018) inspired my description.

AFTERWORD

My mother passed away on Thursday, August 22, 2024, at approximately 7:36 in the morning. Thankfully, she succeeded in finishing the crux of her memoir and only had the nuisance of formatting outstanding, which, really, she needn't have bothered herself with – I picked up where she left off and finished it. Her final journal entry, dated August 12, 2024, reads as follows:

I told Dr. Chu that I am opting out of chemo. He is no longer going to be following up with me, as I will be transferred to palliative care. It seems my body approves of this action, for I have been pain free (THANK YOU, body!!!), following the schedule the palliative care pharmacist set up for me...

... Listening to my body continues to be the #1 priority. And so with gratitude for everything Dr. Chu did for me, I am sending my well-wishes and appreciation. My heart beats lightly; I feel that I have received the care our current medical system could offer. I feel that I have made efforts to “fight” - such an inaccurate term! - or rather, dance with the illness and am now letting the body lead the way. In hindsight, I don't think my body wanted to be “treated”, but it did respond to the treatments that sat well with it - the CML [for instance]. After unpacking the source of the lung cancer, my body also responded well. But the unexpressed anger, possibly also transgenerational, could not be healed or controlled. It is taking its due. I am at awe with my body's wisdom!!! So powerful!!! If I had trusted it more, loved it, and took better care of it over the years, including releasing these fiery emotions like rage, bitterness, resentment, guilt, shame, etc. perhaps things might have been different. No one, of course, can say because this is not the reality I am facing. In this reality, I am focusing on joy, gratitude, kindness, and expressing my emotions, whatever these are.

I stay focused on love! I stay focused on accepting what is to come. I still hope for a peaceful and painless (to the extent it is possible!) death at home, surrounded by my son, husband, Helix, and some of my best friends: Christine & Anna. May it be :)

Please!

She never wrote anything else, so we have no other documentation to provide insight into her mind or experiences near the end. In the days following the meeting with the aforementioned Palliative

Care team, while we were all still operating under the presumption that she had another 3-4 months of life left, her condition deteriorated unexpectedly rapidly, as if her health had suddenly plummeted off of a precipice. She grew exponentially more listless, her illness claiming her in piecemeal - first robbing her of her ability to drive, then her alertness and ability to focus, then her appetite, her ability to walk up and down stairs, her ability to breathe unassisted, and finally, her life altogether. Regardless of the abject paralytic dismay I experienced at the travesty of how quickly she was taken from us, I am nevertheless immensely thankful that my mother received most of what she wished for in her final journal entry. She kept her joyful, optimistic demeanor and gentle, high spirits throughout the conclusion of her journey. Although she did not receive MAID like she had hoped for, her last days were, at least, at home and pain-free. I visited every day in her last week, and friends stopped by periodically, with Christine visiting on her final day, and Anna on the day previous. And, of course, my father was there up until she breathed her last and crossed over to the other side.

As to what happened thereafter... the body she venerated so much in the latter part of her life was cremated, as per her wishes. The ashes now rest on the mantelpiece of the family home, keeping my father company, and awaiting the day I move into a house of my own, at which point they will be mixed with fertile soil into which a willow seedling will be planted and will (hopefully) sprout into a magnificent tree. As to her psyche... whilst I cannot offer personal insights as to her state or whereabouts, I do know that, according to Bulgarian tradition, it is believed that the souls of the deceased linger on the material plane for 40 days, visiting their favorite places. Though there's no guarantee that this is actually the case, I do hope it's true, because we managed to throw my mom one hell of a memorial service; it warms the heart to think that she might have somehow been able to witness it.

It was a singularly uplifting, spectacular moment in my life to see all of the amazing people who made an effort to show up to her memorial. The audience included a plethora of friends and colleagues, some of her students, casual acquaintances, and certain folks with whom we had lost touch over a decade ago. Surprisingly, even a few onetime rivals showed up to pay their respects. This concretely attests to the fact that my mother was a veritable nexus in the grand tapestry of human connections. Her life was so impactful for so many people, that her death summoned a cascade of outreach and heartfelt condolences from the most unanticipated places.

And now... the 40 days are long gone. Her spirit, as per the Bulgarians, has definitively departed into the great beyond. We are left facing an ominous, uncertain, and troubled world made all the darker by her passing. Nevertheless, even amidst the pervasive darkness, I am lucky to have in my possession a candle, in the form of this, her first and final book. My mother was a transformative woman for myself personally, as well as all the many others that she touched throughout her life. It is a great honor to have, by way of physical memento, a precious, intimate account of who she was as a person, which is a much more potent legacy than any mere ephemeral memory.

I hope you feel the same way.

Beloved instructor. Relentless academic. Gentle soul. All these phrases and many others of a similar vein have been used to describe Vessela Balinska-Ourdeva, a Bulgarian-born high school teacher from Edmonton, Alberta. Yet mere words have consistently failed to encapsulate the full breadth and beauty of this quirky, inquisitive, charmingly cerebral person - until now.

In "Healing Soul-Tracks", her magnum opus and final gift to friends and family, Vessela offers us a rare insight into the origins and inner workings of her mind, laced generously with artistic imagery, poetry, and mythopoetic analysis ranging in content from the symbolism behind stalagmites to the flight patterns of butterflies. In addition to serving as a testament to her brilliance and character, this thought-provoking and endlessly engaging memoir serves as an example for her readers, inviting them to embark on their own journeys of healing and mythic self-discovery.

